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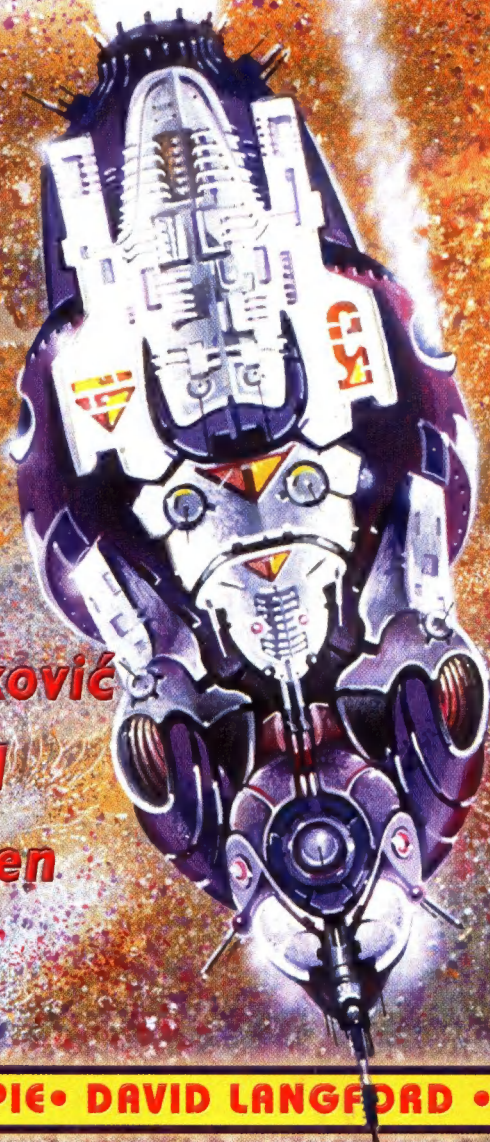
MARCH 2003

NUMBER 187

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**Dominic Green**  
**Nicholas Waller**

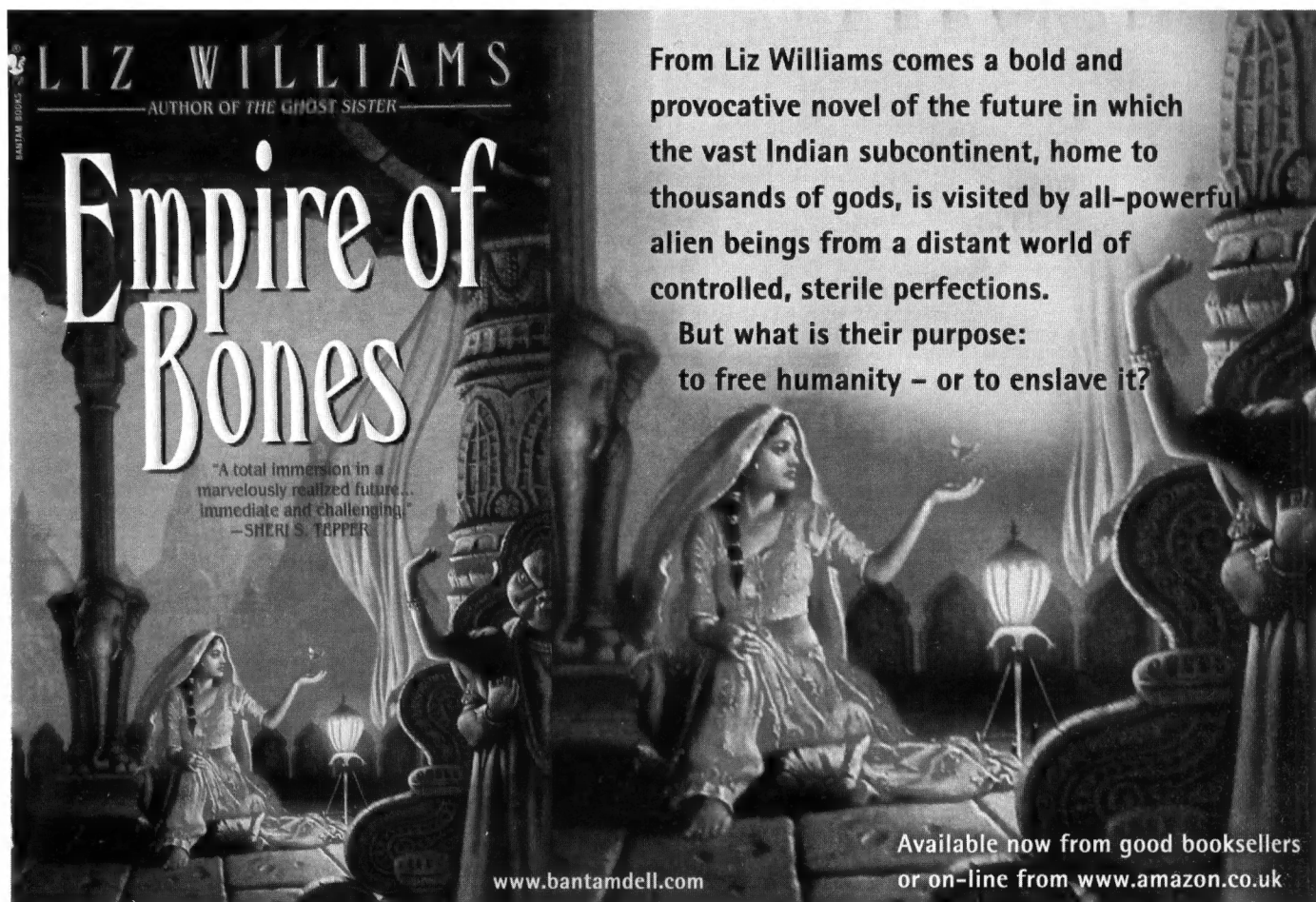
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# interzone

science fiction & fantasy

**MARCH 2003**

**Number 187**

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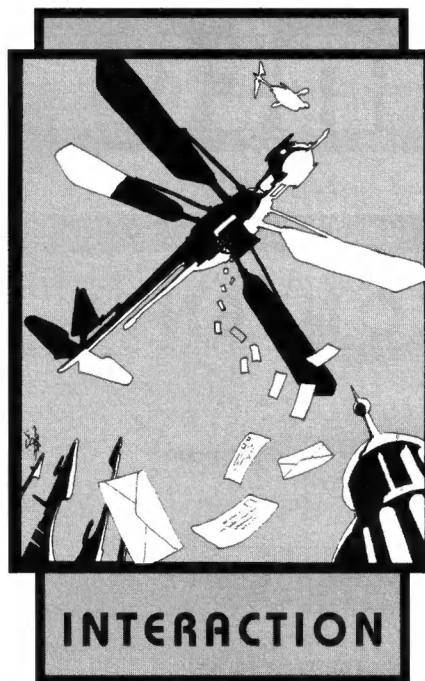
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## Praise for Chris Priest...

Dear Editors:

There was a lot of good fiction in *Interzone* 183, especially John Meaney's neo-Gothic extravaganza, Timons Esaias's fable about the costs of fame (predicting quite accurately what happened to former Royal butler Paul Burrell), and Chris Beckett's tale about the temptations of human dreams of absolute power over others being fulfilled in cyberspace.

I'd also like to praise Nick Gevers's interview with Christopher Priest, surely one of your best non-fiction features of 2002. Having read Priest's *The Separation*, it was very interesting to see his own description of what he was doing in writing it. However, I'm not sure I can agree with the author that it's a pacifist novel, even though it describes circumstances in which the Western Allies could have made a peace deal with Hitler in 1940. *The Separation* itself doesn't give the reader enough information to make it unambiguously clear that the world as a whole would have been a better place if the Nazis had been free to concentrate their energies on the Soviet Union (e.g. we aren't told what happens to the Jews there; the Holocaust was perhaps just as terrible as in our own world, perhaps even worse). It seems to me that *The Separation*, which presents so vividly the complexities of moral action in great



international conflicts (without ever lapsing into a cynical relativism), is a particularly timely novel, given the world situation today, and very much a book of the heart as well as the head.

**Jennifer Swift**  
Oxford

## ... and a Call for Papers

Dear Editors:

To mark Christopher Priest's appearance as Guest of Honour at the British SF Worldcon in August/September 2005, we, under the auspices of the Science Fiction Foundation, intend to edit a new collection of critical essays on Priest's work. Ideally, this book will call wide attention to Priest's importance as a contemporary British fiction writer, as well as providing close and comprehensive insights into the rich specifics of his *oeuvre*. We invite contributions to *Christopher Priest: A Critical Conspectus* (or whatever we call the book).

We envisage articles approximately 8,000 words in length, the deadline for submissions being 31 December 2003. In determining the focus of your paper, you may wish to select from among the following possible topics:

British SF history: interface in CP of the Wellsian scientific romance and the New Wave.

In and Out of Genre: Priest's complicated relationship with SF.

Priest's Style: The Priestly Voice.

Priest: Modernist or Postmodernist?

Priest's metafictional techniques.

Priest's imagination: magic realism or surrealism?

Priest's Literary Oneirism.

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Cosy Catastrophes?: Priest's Apocalypses.

Englishness in Priest: Defiance or Genius of Place?

Priest's genre journalism: Deadloss Visions and Others.

From Infinite Summer to Dream Archipelago: the Literary Evolution of Priest's Islands.

Priestly Amours: Priest's Conventional(?) Eroticism.

Priestly Doppelgangers: the Double in CP's Fiction.

Priest's Confessional Narratives.

Violence Virtual and Actual.

Separations: Priest's Interpretation and Rewriting of History.

If you would prefer to propose your own topic, please feel free to do so; it's our hope that our book will reflect the widest possible range of opinions and methodologies.

Please note: we do envisage a careful editorial process once all articles are submitted. We may edit papers, or request partial rewriting, to guard against redundancy of critical coverage, and essays will be disseminated among contributors for comparison and expert input.

**Andrew M. Butler & Nick Gevers**  
[ambutler@enterprise.net](mailto:ambutler@enterprise.net)

**Editor:** Thanks for that, Andrew and Nick. Perhaps you should call your proposed book *The Conspectus*. Which reminds me – a number of years ago, when Martin Amis's novel *The Information* came out, I found myself thinking, "why has Amis given his book a Chris Priest title?"

## Dinotopia – Evelyn was Right!

Dear Editors:

So the Hallmark made-for-TV version of *Dinotopia* has been a "huge success" in the United States (letters, *IZ* 185): how tragic. I would rate it one of the biggest televisual disappointments of the millennium so far.

Your reviewer, Evelyn Lewes (*IZ* 184) correctly remembers James Gurney's visually stunning book *Dinotopia* (1992) as a classic, although it seems she didn't spot its sequel, *Dinotopia: The World Beneath* (1995), in the same format and just as good.

Gurney is as much an illustrator as a writer. He has worked in the film industry, for museums and for *National Geographic* magazine. As a result, his *Dinotopia* is full of astonishing and eclectic detail, which makes it a hugely enjoyable experience for children and adults alike.

The books are set in the 1860s, are

## Interzone 2002 Popularity Poll

If you can cast your mind back over last year's issues, those that carried a 2002 cover date, we'd appreciate it if you could judge the year's stories. Let us know your thoughts on the contents of *Interzone* issues 175 to 184 inclusive. (The contents of the most recent issue, number 185, and the current issue, number 186, will count towards next year's poll.)

There's no obligation, but we'd appreciate it if readers (especially, perhaps, those who are writing to renew their subscriptions) could send us answers to the following questions. Just e-mail your replies ([interzone@cix.co.uk](mailto:interzone@cix.co.uk)), or write or type them on any piece of paper, and send them to us before the deadline of **31st May 2003**. We'll report the results later in the year.

- 1) Which stories in *Interzone* issues 175-184 inclusive (i.e. those with a 2002 cover date) did you particularly like?
- 2) Which stories in *Interzone* issues 175-184 inclusive did you particularly dislike (if any)?

Any further comments about the magazine, including its non-fiction and artwork, are also welcome.

**David Pringle, Editor**



totally gripping, completely non-didactic and splendidly witty. For some unexplained reason, Hallmark, while being visually true to Gurney's world, ignored his storyline and plumped instead for a desperately uninspired and humourless script by one Simon Moore, set in the present day – so for once, Evelyn's vague memories have not failed her.

As Evelyn mentioned in her original review, the acting – particularly that of Katie Carr as the appallingly smug Marion – is dire, while “Zippo,” the librarian, gets the Jar Jar Binks Award for Most Ghostly Animated Chum.

Hallmark obviously threw loads of money into making *Dinotopia*, but it just goes to show that if you haven't got a script, you haven't got anything – unless, that is, you watch it with the sound turned down.

**Deirdre Counihan**

Brighton

deirdre@dcounihan.fsnet.co.uk

## Another “Year's Best” Review

Dear Editors:

It's a pity that the review by Neil Jones and Neil McIntosh of “Year's Best” anthologies in the January issue did not include David G. Hartwell's *Year's Best SF 7*. I like Hartwell's Best-Ofs since his choice seems to match my preference slightly better than Dozois. It's harder to tell with only one example of the Silverberg/Haber so far.

Hartwell's is a similar size to the Silverberg & Haber, but with smaller print. The introduction includes a brief summation of the year, whereas S&H's was only a history of the best-of. The smaller print means Hartwell managed to fit 19 stories in instead of just eleven.

The stories that managed total overlap were “Undone” by James Patrick Kelly, and “The Dog Said Bow-Wow” by Michael Swanwick. The Dozois/Hartwell overlap was “Computer Virus” by Nancy Kress, and “Glacial” by Alastair Reynolds. The S&H/DGH overlap was “Anomalies” by Gregory Benford. Which leaves 14 stories, making it worth buying if you can find it (it's an import). Hartwell clearly likes the *Scifiction* website (from which he printed the Ings, Swanwick, and Dowling) and the original anthology *Redshift* (from which came the Morrell, Le Guin, Disch, and Benford).

The unshared stories are “Charlie's Angels” by Terry Bisson (a silly alien device story with doses of Aztec myth and *The Fifth Element*), “The Measure of All Things” by Richard Chedwyk (a quiet story about an old-toys' home), “Russian Vine” by Simon Ings (a good depressing story about the personal effects of alien-imposed illiteracy from the alien point of view), “Under's Game” by Michael Swanwick (satirical short-short), “A Matter of Mathematics” by Brian Aldiss (which

seems to have the shape of a fantasy story, which I don't like), “Creative Destruction” by Edward M. Lerner (a novella about the start of the interstellar exchange of ideas, with good politics), “Resurrection” by David Morrell (unexcitingly about growing old), “The Cat's Pajamas” by James Morrow (silly gross-out with a cast of mutants), “The Building” by Ursula K. Le Guin (alien anthropology monologue with no characters), “Gray Earth” by Stephen Baxter (tedious reverse Neanderthal extinction), “The Lagan Fishers” by Terry Dowling (fantastic contact with incomprehensible alien artefacts), “In Xanadu” by Thomas M. Disch (uploading gone wrong, more interesting offstage than on), “The Go-Between” by Lisa Goldstein (nice doggy alien anthropology mystery), and “Viewpoint” by Gene Wolfe (exciting reality TV *Running Man* thriller).

**Tony Finch**

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*Editor: Thanks for the additional “review,” Mr Finch! (Alas, HarperCollins USA don't send us review copies of their Hartwell-edited anthologies at all regularly.)*

## 2002 Story Poll Responses

Dear Editors:

Greetings! Best *Interzone* stories for 2002:

“Hole in the Wall,” Zoran Živković.

“Blue Water, Grey Death,” Dominic Green.

“Lucid,” Alexander Glass.

“Bingo Night at a Martian Sportsbar,”  
Thomas M. Disch.

“The Yellow Flower,” Don Webb.

“The Ghost in the Valley,” Alexander Glass.

“The Head,” James Lovegrove

“Teaching the War Robot to Dance,” Tony Balantyne.

“Envy, the Gardens of Ynath, and the Sin of Cain,” Darrell Schweitzer.

“Welcome to the Green Planet,” Keith Brooke.

“Time Spent in Reconnaissance,” Mat Coward.

“Old Tingo's Penis,” Geoffrey A. Landis.

Please retain current form, especially Gary Westfahl, David Langford and Nick Lowe. Reading Nick's film review column is like talking to a friend after you have both seen the movie and are debating the finer points. Somewhat one-way, but it suits because I always see the movie before receiving the relevant *Interzone*. I find Evelyn Lewes irrelevant only because nearly everything she covers I do not have access to or interest in. So if Nick is unwilling to condescend to the

small screen perhaps Evelyn will slip in the odd vid or DVD that escapes the big screen. Of course your book reviews are another reason for subscribing.

I will need a new dictionary after reading John Clute's novel *Appleseed* (am I the only one?) – masterful stuff, though, said the profoundly humble pseudosavant.

**Derek Grubb**

Australind

Western Australia

Dear Editors:

For the first time, I would like to vote for the best stories of the last year. I think there weren't too many powerful stories published during 2002, no “Isabel of the Fall” and no “Meeting the Relatives.” So, in my opinion, compared with 2001, the last year wasn't such a good *Interzone* year.

The story I liked most surely was Timons Esaias's “Fame.” Second place goes to Mat Coward's “Little Green Card,” followed by Geoffrey A. Landis' very funny “Old Tingo's Penis” at place three. Other notable stories I liked a lot:

“The Blue Portal,” Eric Brown

“The Whispers of Discs,” John Meaney

“Time Spent in Reconnaissance,” Mat Coward

“Elysian Dreams,” Alexander Glass

“The Turing Test,” Chris Beckett

“Hole in the Wall,” Zoran Živković

“Bestial Acts,” Claude Lalumière

Stories I'm afraid I didn't like at all were:

“The Eater,” Andy Robertson

“Bingo Night at a Martian Sportsbar,”  
Thomas M. Disch

“The Sharecropper,” Liz Williams

“New World,” Mary Soon Lee

“Tread Softly,” Brian Stableford

“Envy, the Gardens of Ynath, and the Sin of Cain,” Darrell Schweitzer

“Osmund Considers,” Timons Esaias

“News from Hilaria,” Dominic Green

“The Dark,” Richard Calder

“The Happy Gang,” Neil Williamson

Aside from the stories, I very much enjoy the high-quality interviews, the film and TV reviews as well as the book reviews. Having to mail-order almost all my reading stuff (at least the English-language material), the book reviews are especially important to me. Yet, last year it seemed to me, that the book reviews have been fewer than in the years before. I haven't done a statistical analysis in order to back up my assumption, so it may be true or it may not. Nevertheless, the message here is: Please, don't cut back the book reviews section.

I very much hope that you will be able to publish *Interzone* for many years to come. I will keep reading it!

**Thomas Wedekind**

Cologne, Germany

Letters for publication should be e-mailed to [interzone@cix.co.uk](mailto:interzone@cix.co.uk) – or sent by conventional post to our editorial address (shown on the contents page). Please note that we reserve the right to shorten letters.





# SAND TRAP

Nicholas Waller

**L**in Adenuka stared out as the arc of the planet grew slowly to fill his soloship's viewport. He had grown tired of many things but never this, the sight of a new world, round and full and apparently immovable against the deep. Now, finally, it was to be given a chance at a history of its own. Or a second chance, perhaps.

48-274C. "Churned," it had been nicknamed. A dull name, but it wasn't the prettiest planet he'd seen. A million shades of amber and brown, topped and tailed with dirty white ice, and all mashed up. It was hard to imagine that there had ever been life – even low-temperature rock microbes – on that forbidding, beaten-up surface. There was no indigenous life now, of course, and a thin, unbreathable atmosphere, but the place had potential for a productive future. Ripe for comet-seeding; when there was water there'd be seasons.

One of General Construction's most promising system overhauls, if only a minor local difficulty could be fixed. It was fiddly, political and possibly career-threatening. There were several ways to get it wrong; the easiest would be to dither. Got to get in there hard, make a splash, shake things up. Tread on some top toes, go softly softly with the rest. Flush out the real truth. And then strike hard.

He sighed. He was getting too old for this. Too many idiots were ready to help you screw up.

This Vannan, for instance, the security officer. His Incident Report was pedantic and clumsy, raising more questions than it answered. Who did he think he was

kid-  
ding? He made it harder to marshal the information satisfactorily. Vannan should have left the bodies *in situ*, for a start. Still, perhaps on the ground that hadn't been possible. Staff morale, lab gossip...

Adenuka reviewed the case. An accident, that was the published conclusion. Three researchers killed in a quake-generated rock slide while out on an extended field trip. Dr Kolade Teiss, field geological surveyor. His assistant, Dawn Ray. And, somewhat oddly, Dr Erica Sobhy, the base medical officer. What was she doing there?

Vannan had not thought it worthy of mention. Vannan would be the way in.

And there'd be at least one other person who knew what was really going on, besides Vannan and Dau Peke, the base commander. He ran his eyes down the list. Someone on the jump crews, perhaps, though they all seemed to be off-world. Peke's administrative assistant, Dhama Salabi – she should have a finger on every string in the place. Jan Lei, the survey's analyst, collator of Teiss's field work. Gabi Barakat, the young bio-modeller and, more relevantly, a part-time assistant to the dead medical officer. Though she too barely featured in Vannan's report, perhaps she knew more than anyone



guessed. Perhaps everyone did.

Chimes softly sounded.

"Base One has a lock-on," said ainode. "And they give us one minute to identify ourselves."

Adenuka smiled. What did they think they could do to him? But he sat up. Time to tell them he was coming.

"Two seventy four-C Base," he said. "I am Arbiter Adenuka on board Police Ship *Extreme Clarity*. Top priority, Code Red, Arbiter business. Planetfall imminent. I require complete cooperation. In particular, I want an up-to-date breakdown of base personnel, histories, job descriptions, rosters and site procedures; plus any relevant statements concerning your recent serious fatal incident. Interference with my mission is an offence that will result in sanctions. I wish to be met by Security Officer Vannan."

He signed off. That would cause some consternation, people running around, mining for the information he wanted and the protocols for the situation. Some Arbiters preferred to arrive unannounced, but that could be dangerous. Construction companies were jealous of their rights and liable to shoot at unknowns. *Clarity* could respond with devastating firepower, of course, but that would defeat the purpose of coming in the first place.

"Entry initiated," said ainode. Adenuka checked his webbing and then lay back and closed his eyes. Nothing to do for a while.

Under automatics, the police ship dropped screaming through the thin atmosphere towards the surface of the planet, arcing towards Survey Base One. Adenuka relaxed into his harness, enjoying the feeling of the G-forces building up on his body as the ship descended. Somehow it always felt like coming home.

The landing was routine and on-target, the shrieking winds inaudible inside. Adenuka checked his screens. Even after the sandstorm had blown itself away, Adenuka could see little evidence of the base itself, apart from a few dish antennae on the ridge.

"Welcome to Churned, Arbiter," came a tinny voice over the comm. "I am Vannan. Security. I hope you had a good trip, sir."

A bright blue tank on large spring-mesh wheels was trundling across the apron towards the ship.

"It was fine, thank you."

"Um... I am to take you directly to Base Commander Dau Peke. If that's all right."

"Of course."

The tank drew up and a salt-and-pepper-haired, stocky middle-aged man in an oxymask clambered out.

Adenuka slowly and deliberately went through the checklist for safing his ship. By the time he had finished, stowed everything loose away, dressed in heavy outer clothes and checked and donned his own oxygen mask, Adenuka could almost hear Vannan's impatience radiating over the link. He smiled, and picked up his pack.

"I am ready now," he said. "OK ainode, she's all yours."

The main hatch opened, and Adenuka felt as though he had been transported to a high mountain as the warmth of his cabins dissipated in the cold, clear air. The

distant horizon was crisp and virginal, worn rocky mountains amber in the setting sun.

He descended the ramp carefully. Just before he stepped off the ship and onto the apron he deliberately checked that his pistol was at his belt. People would be watching.

Vannan stepped forward. Adenuka held up a hand to stop him. He then walked slowly round *Clarity*, giving her a visual once-over. It was technically unnecessary, but gave him a chance to get his land legs and have a look round the field. There was only one other ship on the ground, a motherland shuttle over on the far side, ugly and squat. His own ship was a sleek thing by comparison, streamlined as though sculpted by millennia of flowing water. When he got a chance to look at her like this, standing proud on the surface of a new planet, silvery and elegant against a lumpy natural world, he never ceased to marvel that he was allowed to run this fabulous vehicle as though it was his own personal charger.

Of course, there were risks he had to take, and a price to pay. Compromise, for instance.

He tapped one last weapon panel and stepped back. Perfect, of course. Ainode would have said, otherwise. But it gave everyone an opportunity to appreciate the resources he could summon up at will. He was the projection of legal power into the raw, lawless wilderness and people had to believe in him. It had once amazed him how much frontier police work was actually a con trick, a form of theatre.

Satisfied, Adenuka turned away and walked towards Vannan. The security officer seemed nervous. Good.

"Arbiter. Welcome, sir." They shook hands. Vannan gestured awkwardly at the tank with his free hand. "We recommend you keep your mask on, on board."

"Is this a new requirement? Since the, ah, accident?"

"Yes," said Vannan.

Adenuka pulled himself up and into the tank with one smooth movement, as though he had been doing it for years. Vannan clambered in after him, and turned clumsily to tug the hatch shut. It was gloomy inside, tight-packed with storage bins and racks for research equipment and with only bare, tubular seats. Up front sat the youngish, rangy driver in his command bubble.

"OK, Allan," said Vannan. "Let's be off."

"Allan?" said Adenuka.

"Dr Allan Arras, sir," said the driver crisply. "It's an honour."

The tank set off, churning up red sand from the dead world.

As they crested the ridge dividing the base from the port, Adenuka looked out ahead intently, gauging the accuracy of his briefing data. Looked good. A wide, shallow valley, with the main Survey Base accommodation and lab domes nesting near the south wall like so many fragile eggshells. The squat power generator was over to the north, solar collectors and hydroponic farms spread out in the middle. All the other buildings appeared to fit their stated function. Garage and workshops for the tanks. Hangars for the flitters. Satellite ground station. Repair shops, observatory facilities, sample stores. Medic



station. It looked spartan and functional, as suited a temporary operation. Little sign of feather-bedding.

"How many work here?"

"Uh, sir, Dau Peke told me I should refrain from detailed..."

Adenuka looked at him calmly.

"Um... 46, sir, all told, including support staff..."

"Is that before – or after?"

Vannan stared out ahead of him. "After." He turned to Adenuka. "Look. Sorry to be so forward, but do you mind telling me why you've come here? My report—"

"Please give me the full cooperation I requested, Officer Vannan."

Vannan looked away, reddening. "Certainly."

Adenuka nodded. Vannan was a worried man, with good reason: he had caused the law to become interested, and that meant trouble for someone. The driver was clearly aware of it too, looking as though he was paying no attention.

"Allan Arras? Is this the same tank-type involved in the accident?"

"To Dr Teiss?" he asked.

"Are there other accidents I should know about?"

"No, sorry. Yes sir, this is the same type."

"Did the explanation for the accident convince you?"

He hesitated, too long. "Well, yes, sir."

Adenuka glanced at Vannan, whose expression was stony. "Of course, you didn't investigate the site personally, did you Allan? But tell me – were you surprised that a tank was involved?"

"Yes. We trust these things completely. Sometimes the wheels go, you know, or the engine – mechanical stuff. But the hull splitting? Still, I guess we're out on the edge here. Can't guarantee nothing will go wrong."

The tank rumbled in among building units and hab-and-lab blocks. Close up, the Base's temporary nature was all the more apparent, like a million research camps before it, a jumbled collection of pre-fabs and tunnels and dishes and pipes and solar cells and cables and antennae and domes and bits of abandoned junk, all the detritus of a planetary survey command centre. No big surprises. And all together in one place, so it could be kept under control.

As the tank turned off the central track Adenuka caught a glimpse of a small moon just above the horizon, white and distant and rising full.

"That's the only natural satellite?"

Vannan nodded. "For this planet, yes."

"Any personnel deployed there?"

"No. Well, Dr Teiss surveyed it, of course."

"Did he now. Any joy?"

"We could have set up a station but it's not worth forming it. Not yet, anyway."

"Did you wonder why?"

"Airless. Waterless, even underground. No He<sup>3</sup> to speak of. Low gravity, too – an atmosphere would leak away. And finally, there are bigger, better candidates in the system."

The tank pulled up outside the main entrance lock, a silvery semi-circle of steel and white plastics. Arras

released the hatch and Vannan and Adenuka clambered out. Adenuka looked round curiously. It was an austere place to spend years of your life, but he supposed it had its rewards for those sick of the crowded worlds. And one day, in the far future, this world too would be teeming with life. If nothing derailed the project.

"Allan," said Vannan, leaning back inside the tank. "The Arbiter's conversation is classified, of course—"

"Oh, I don't think that's true, is it?" said Adenuka, smiling. "No, Allan, let your colleagues know I'll be talking to you all. Give you time to get your stories straight, eh?"

Arras looked briefly at Vannan, then Adenuka. "Yes, sir."

Vannan shut the hatch and slapped the hull twice. With a high whining of the motor, the tank turned and pulled away, kicking up dust from its huge wheels.

"Any personnel elsewhere in-system?" Adenuka asked as he watched the tank fade into the shadows of the valley wall.

"A shifted crew manning our mother ship. She's in orbit, six people on board. And a shepherd ship running the first comets down on Churned." Vannan pulled at the bulky outer airlock door and showed Adenuka in. "Six on that, too. As you'll find out, we're only weeks away from the primary impacts."

"Why didn't you mention those personnel before?"

"Offworld since well before the accident. They weren't relevant."

Adenuka was glad to be able to remove his sweaty oxygen mask as soon as they cycled through the airlock. He shook his head and ran a hand through his damp hair.

"I'll judge what I think is relevant," he said, as they headed off down a long institutional corridor, greyly lit with flat fluorescent panels. "Are there any other crew you've failed to mention? No personnel on the ice caps? No field trip out in the high deserts?"

"No," said Vannan. "The other field missions were called back after the accident, for review of procedures."

"And no one from the operation has left the planet since the accident?"

"No! And the records will show—"

"The records can be amended, Mr Vannan."

Vannan visibly bit the inside of his cheek. Not professional police material, thought Adenuka. You have to compartmentalize your thoughts and emotions.

"Mr Vannan," said Adenuka, conversationally. "Do you do something else apart from security?"

Vannan looked at him. "Everyone has to double or triple up somehow... we wouldn't get far if we didn't. Me, I'm mainly in facilities management. Resources and logistics, that sort of thing." He stopped. "Here we are. Dau Peke's office."

He knocked on the door and at the loud acknowledgment from inside he pushed the door open and ushered Adenuka in.

The office was not a bad size, functional rather than spacious. Already standing on the far side of his desk was a moon-faced man with piercing blue eyes. Next to him was a tall, olive-skinned woman, introduced as Dhama Salabi. Adenuka nodded at them both and sat down with-

out shaking hands. Peke, momentarily surprised, sat too. After a moment's hesitation, so did Vannan and Salabi.

"I never thought I'd have to greet an Arbiter here," said Peke. "But you are welcome... Of course I would rather... I felt our, ah, investigation covered the facts adequately..."

"I'll come to the point, Commander," said Adenuka, firmly. "Your attempted investigation of this incident has explained little, allayed no fears and left several open ends. It's one of the worst reports—"

"Just a minute!" said Vannan.

"One of the worst reports of its kind I've seen. Your staff know something is wrong. I suspect they don't buy the accident story."

"But —" said Dau Peke.

Adenuka raised his hand. "My preliminary open report, which will be released to the staff, states that at first sight it appears Teiss, Sobhy and Ray were murdered as a result of as yet undetermined intercorporate rivalry, espionage or worse."

"That's madness!"

"Nonetheless, it's done."

"That allegation could spark a big dispute with Heavy Planets or TranScor!" Dau Peke leaned forward. "We're at a very sensitive stage of the planetforming of this system. Colossal investments have been made. The engineering is at a critical point. We are about to start raining comets down on the planet, for god's sake! It's a very large energy deficit that this corporation does not take lightly. We don't need even the suspicion of violent conflict with our competitors and in fact we don't accuse them of those criminal acts."

"I am aware it is in your interests to implement a cover-up. I also remind you that my level of accreditation is red."

Dau Peke sighed. "I hope you've thought this through."

"I am imposing a block on all out-of-system traffic," said Adenuka. "I want to see all staff who can be spared from essential duties." He looked over at Vannan. "Perhaps you could see to that, now."

Vannan rose to his feet and left, reluctantly.

"Mr Vannan is not the best-ever security chief," said Adenuka once the door had closed.

"It's not a role that takes up a lot of time," said Dhama Salabi. "Normally. We don't want to burden our research workers with it."

"How about you?" said Adenuka.

She shrugged. "I could take on the portfolio, but it fits Vannan's other duties admirably. In our case, security is usually more about monitoring pressurization and maintenance standards. That and the odd incident of drunkenness."

"And what about your md-lasers and your nukes?"

"Those too, of course. But they're an insurance facility. No one person has authority over them. They have never been used."

"And Vannan is trustworthy," said Dau Peke.

"As we're on the subject of resource management..." said Adenuka, leaning back.

"We have collated the personnel and other records you requested," said Salabi, and handed over a chip. "Plus all

the images of the accident site."

"Thank you. You may leave us."

"But—"

"It's all right, Dhama," said Dau Peke, soothingly. "I'll talk to you later."

Salabi walked out in stony silence.

"I see she is used to being your eyes and ears, Commander," said Adenuka.

"She is also the public face of our AI, in fact... a lightning rod. We keep our aicore at a low profile here. People are superstitious."

"Even scientists," said a strange voice from the walls.

Adenuka looked up. "Aicore? Have you contacted my ship ainode?"

"Of course. But as Commander Peke says, I keep a low profile here."

"Yes," said Peke. "Now, how do you plan to proceed?"

"High profile," said Adenuka. "You may be sure I will clear this up quickly. But I will not associate with Salabi or of course the aicore, for the sake of credibility with the staff."

"Good plan," said the aicore. "I will stay in the background."

Dau Peke looked at Adenuka appraisingly. "Hmm. How much do you really know?"

"More than you think. Less than I'd like."

"What is your agenda, if I might ask?"

"No. But I do wish to confirm that your trusted staff are you, Vannan and Salabi and no one else?"

Dau Peke looked surprised at first. He stared hard at Adenuka, then smiled warily. "Yes, Arbiter. If I read you right."

Adenuka stood, and this time shook hands. "Discretion, Commander. Watch what you say."

"Arbiter," said Peke. "You have my complete cooperation."

Adenuka had just a few moments to spend in the tiny room he had been assigned, on the excuse of dropping off his pack and checking in with the ship ainode. After scoping the place for bugs, he put aside the incident site pictures — not much point of that — and swiftscanned the files on the Base, the research programme, the planetforming timetable, the organizational framework and the individual personnel.

Now he could stride into the lecture theatre with apparent confidence. He was impressed. It was the largest pressurized space on the planet, indeed, the entire solar system.

Practically the whole staff had managed to cram into the small room, standing around the walls or perching on tables. Even Dau Peke was there.

Vannan gave Adenuka a list of personnel, marked with the four people who were absent on essential duty.

"No field trips have gone out in the last few minutes?"

"Of course not!"

Adenuka smiled at him encouragingly, then turned to face his audience.

They mostly looked concerned, as well they might. It was a rare day when an Arbiter, the longest and potentially most violent arm of the law, intruded into people's



working lives. Just the fact he was there meant some high authority took this incident extremely seriously. Adenuka hoped that would encourage a mistake under pressure. Whoever he was looking for – and he was sure there was at least one person to hunt down – was an amateur, not a meticulous criminal with nested plans and several avenues of escape. No, if there was any conspirator still here he was trapped. And trapped doing some mundane job, too. It could be anyone.

“You know why I’ve come. The circumstances of the deaths of your three colleagues are not clearcut.” He paused. “You may think it unusual that an Arbiter is here to investigate an apparent accident. But we take the upholding of the law on the frontier as seriously as in the heartworlds.” He leaned forward for emphasis. “The idea is that ten billion souls will one day make Churned their home. We need to get to the truth of what has happened here, to ensure that this development is based on the soundest possible foundations of property and human rights, not to mention morals.” He paused. “You may think that superstitious. But I believe that at the heart of this incident there was murder, plain and simple. It can not and will not stand.”

He scanned the audience. Most of them looked surprised, even shocked. Some seemed bemused, unsure what was going on. Allan Arras nudged one of his colleagues, as if to say, see, I told you so. Peke and Salabi blanched, but said nothing.

Two of the group looked particularly intent, both sitting forward. Interesting. They were two of the people Adenuka had picked out while still in transit: Jan Lei, the experienced analyst of Professor Teiss’s field work, and Gabi Barakat, the modeller and assistant to the medic, Dr Sobhy. These two had worked closest with their dead colleagues.

Adenuka leaned over to Vannan, pointing at the personnel printout. “I want to see everybody. But these two first.”

Gabi Barakat was edgy, twisting her water cup between her fingers as she sat in the makeshift interview room. Vannan sat on the edge of his seat, ready to make notes. Adenuka switched on his legal camera and sat casually on the steel desk, smiling sympathetically at Barakat. She was attractive in a fresh-faced way, with big eyes and her straight dark hair falling free. She also looked pale and nervous and under some stress.

“Dr Sobhy was important to you?”

“Important? To my career, of course. I respected her. And personally I liked her a lot.”

“Did she have any enemies?”

“Not... well, no.”

“Was her death on the field trip an accident?”

Barakat glanced at Vannan. “Well, we don’t have any evidence otherwise, you know. No one saw the site...”

“You didn’t see the bodies?”

“There were no bodies, as such,” said Vannan. “Completely carbonized.”

Barakat seemed to go even paler.

“Mr Vannan,” said Adenuka. “Please refrain from mak-

ing comments. Now, Gabi. Following the death of Teiss, Ray and Sobhy, you say you, as the ranking medical officer, were not allowed to inspect the remains?”

“Well, MO in name only. More of a paramedic. I’m no pathologist...”

“You claim no one else saw them?”

“Mr Vannan. And Commander Dau Peke. And Salabi, I think.”

“Didn’t that strike you as odd?”

Barakat looked uncomfortable. “Well, yes.”

“Did you make an effort to see the bodies?”

“We were told there were none. As Mr Vannan said.”

“Did you believe him?”

Gabi Barakat bit her lip and spoke carefully. “I had no reason to doubt him. I am not an expert... on the conditions of the accident.”

“Did you see the wrecked tank?”

“No. I understand it was largely obliterated. The bits have not been brought back to base.”

“Still out on site? Schedule a visit for me, will you Vannan? I ought to see the place for myself.”

“You’ve seen the reports and the 3Ds, haven’t you?” said Vannan.

“That’s not the point,” Adenuka said, allowing an edge of irritation to show.

“Um, I am sure on worlds with bigger teams and more resources such incident investigation would have... you know. Higher priority,” said Barakat.

“Yes,” said Adenuka. “And maybe you knew already that it was murder, and didn’t care to pry too closely?”

“Of course not!” she said. But she seemed rattled. “What do you mean?”

Adenuka smiled, and checked down at his notes. “Now, Gabi, why was the medical officer out on a geology field trip?”

Barakat seemed surprised but relieved at the shift. “It was unusual, but not unprecedented. She liked to monitor the work environment first-hand, get an idea of safety implications, stress. Bad practice, and good. She saw it as part of her job. And she did some research analysis. She was familiar with communications and satellite management...”

“Like I said,” said Vannan. “We double up a lot round here.”

Adenuka turned to him. “Please, Mr Vannan!” He turned back. “Anything more, Gabi..? Any other interests?”

“What do you mean?”

“Professionally or otherwise. Did she have any goals or plans, other than the ones you’ve mentioned?”

“No.”

“Any expressed wish to retire to some luxury planet?”

Despite herself, Barakat smiled. “No. She lived for her work.”

“Did you go on any of these trips yourself?”

“Yes I did. It was great to get out in the field.”

Adenuka slammed the desk so hard that Barakat jumped. He leant forward until his face was inches from hers. “So when did you suspect your friends were passing information to another conglomerate?”

"What?!"

"Spying for GC's competitors? Betraying you and your colleagues? Planning sabotage?"

"That's a lie!"

"How do you know?"

"I – I don't believe it!"

Adenuka sat back down on the desk. "That's not really enough, you know. Not for a court of law."

"But I'm positive there's nothing like that!"

"And when were you recruited?"

"Recruited? For what?"

"For spying missions of your own."

"Good lord!" exclaimed Vannan.

"That's ridiculous!"

"All right," said Adenuka, smiling suddenly. "Now, just how well did you know Dr Kolade Teiss personally?"

Barakat looked at him in surprise, then down then at her twisting hands. Her nails were bitten. "I knew him well."

"Just 'well'?"

"Well."

"Look at me, Dr Barakat."

She looked up. Adenuka stared at her, hard. She tried to hold his gaze, but couldn't, and looked down again.

"I won't trouble you any more right now," said Adenuka, gently. "You may leave."

Barakat, surprised, got up and left without looking back.

"But Arbiter," whispered Vannan urgently. "Why let her go now? She knows more!"

Adenuka looked at him coldly. "Please allow me to conduct my own investigation. Now, who's next?"

Jan Lei was tiny and bustling and confident. Adenuka invited her to sit, appraising her. Brisk, experienced and doubtless with a sharp tongue. She glanced suspiciously at Vannan, then at Adenuka.

"Dr Lei, you collated the data and analyzed the results for Professor Teiss and the survey team, correct?"

"Yes, Arbiter."

"Did you see any unusual data?"

"Unusual? No. Just data. Normal geological, physical readings. Details, here a peak, there a trough. Filling in the orbital streams." She relaxed, as if giving a tutorial to first-year students. "What we do is hardly cutting-edge stuff, Arbiter. We ensure there are no big surprises so that the planetforming programme goes smoothly. After all, engineering a planet is a major undertaking, and as you said in another context, it has to be on a secure foundation. A lot of that is pretty routine work."

Adenuka smiled. "You can spare us my own lecture, Dr Lei. Now, did you see any particular packets of information from Professor Teiss intended – for other eyes?"

"Outgoing packets? For whom?"

"Other development corporations, like Heavy Planets. Maybe wreckers and saboteurs. Or environmentalists."

"Industrial espionage, you mean?"

"Perhaps..."

"Dr Teiss was a spy? Not a chance. But if your theory was correct, how would I know?"

"Maybe you worked with him?"

Lei glanced at Vannan. "This accident – there's definitely something weird about it. But spying? No."

"Why not?"

"You're asking me? Well... I know that a plausible con-man is just that – plausible. But listen. If this was about spying, why kill them? Who killed them? Their own masters? Commander Peke? A third party? Someone playing very very hard. It doesn't make sense."

"What other jobs do you do, Dr Lei?"

"Eh? Oh, I take a turn on the farm. I'm even trained up to operate the port, though I've never had to bring in a ship. And nets and comms stuff."

"Stuff... like satellite comms?"

"It goes with the territories."

"No extra income earner from an outside source?"

"Outside..." Her eyes narrowed. "Certainly not!"

"You were in on this!" said Vannan suddenly, prodding a stubby finger at her. "You set the satellite uplink! Or hacked the shuttle comms!"

"What satellite uplink is that?" said Adenuka, turning to him.

"There must have been one. To get the big discovery out..."

"What Big Discovery?" said Lei.

Adenuka stood, suddenly, pulling a small rectangular device from his belt. "Officer Vannan, you're under arrest for espionage in general—"

"What?! Come on, sir!"

"And particularly for the murder of Dr Teiss, Dr Sobhy and Dr Ray."

"But it's—"

"Silence, or you will be incapacitated."

"It's nothing to do with—"

Adenuka touched his device to Vannan's neck. He collapsed onto his chair, crumpled and slowly slipped off sideways, his head hitting the ground with a bang. Jan Lei stood, her chair clattering to the floor as she stepped back, staring, horrified.

"Neural stunner." Adenuka holstered his pistol and got down to his knees to check on Vannan's pulse. "He'll recover to answer questions."

"Vannan was a spy?" said Lei from the wall.

"You don't believe it?"

"Well... Frankly, no."

"Security officer gives you lots of opportunity, but it is hardly the most discreet cover."

"And a killer? Him?!" Lei shook her head.

Adenuka shrugged. "He got found out... Dr Teiss found him out, I'd guess. Vannan had to kill him and cover his tracks."

Lei seemed fascinated despite herself. "What about the others?"

"The medical officer was the only one capable of properly informed suspicion of the cause of death, so she had to die too." Adenuka stood and wiped his hands on a tissue, thinking... "Dr Ray was probably just unlucky. In the wrong place at the wrong time."

"I wouldn't have thought Vannan capable," said Lei, looking down at his body. "He's such... such an officious bureaucrat, you know?"



"No one liked him? Or trusted him?"

"Dau Peke's man. Or Salabi's, anyway, so he made us all think. Always reporting things to her." She shook her head. "I guess that was to keep us all at a distance... Who was he spying for?"

Adenuka sat down on his desk again. "I'm afraid I cannot discuss any more details." He looked down at Vannan. "How does one call secure medical assistance here?"

Adenuka let Vannan stew under arrest. He took a chance and let Peke and Salabi fume a little too. As he had expected, he found everyone else's tongues looser now, and over the next few days he heard a lot.

Trev Zamanin, for instance, one of the hydroponicists, was surprised that Vannan was involved in industrial spying, but now she thought about it, the more likely it seemed, as he was nearing the end of an undistinguished career. To kill three colleagues just to protect himself was of course beyond contempt.

Allan Arras now agreed that he was suspicious of the accident, as he'd hinted on the drive in. It always looked deliberate. He'd been out there, seen it. Gin Grah, who had overall responsibility for the survey's air and ground vehicles, was relieved that there was no lingering blame over poor maintenance. She'd never doubted herself. She had always thought the accident story was nonsense.

Why had no one raised these concerns publicly, or with the senior managers? asked Adenuka. Jan Lei thought no one wanted to believe there was a killer about. Stef Robun from tech support thought nobody wanted to rock the boat at this difficult late stage of the planetform project. Hasem Candakar, the lone-wolf meteorological modeller, said no one trusted the management.

What about the actual technical aspect of Vannan's illicit communications? How did he do it?

Ron Felan, the lead communications officer, said there were no records of official channels being used. Viv Patorus, part-time inventory manager and full-time soil engineer, did now think that he'd noticed some missing spare comms components, but there wasn't enough wrong to bring to anyone else's attention. Yes, maybe stock control was not as good as it could have been, but everybody was working crazily hard, rushing to meet the deadline, and anyway everything was going to be abandoned and destroyed soon enough when the stream of shepherded comets came raining down with their life-bringing water. He hadn't suspected larceny, only over-enthusiasm.

And, Adenuka asked, how did anyone think Dr Teiss might have uncovered Vannan's secret off-world communications? Could anyone else be involved? Any other examples of strange behaviour amongst the crew?

Everyone had a theory about somebody, now that Adenuka had blown the lid off the accident story. Allan Arras, said someone, he spends a lot of time out in the tanks. Dhama Salabi, she was a strange person; never quite got a handle on her relationship with Vannan or Peke. Smit thought Grah spent too much time talking to the plants. Almost everyone thought Candakar had plenty of time alone to get up to all sorts of wrong-doing.

Patiently Adenuka worked through the entire crew, sifting their ill-informed comments and ideas and prejudices, searching for hints of their deeper feel for what was really going on, knowledge they might not realize that they had or had divulged. He pushed no one, he just worked steadily, ploddingly onwards.

No one, it seemed, had much to say about the assistant medical officer and junior all-round researcher, Dr Gabi Barakat. Discreet, affable, she was well-liked. And how close to Kolade Teiss?

Eventually Adenuka so arranged it that he ran into Gabi Barakat at one of the drinks dispensers at a junction of the main dome's main corridors. Still pale and drawn under the dim, functional lights, she seemed marginally more at ease. She wore her hair bunched up on top of her head, as though willing now to let people see her.

"How are you?" asked Adenuka, kindly.

"Better," said Barakat. She sipped her drink. "I was glad you arrested Vannan. Surprised, but glad. Is this crazy? I had an idea it was something to do with him." She closed her eyes.

Adenuka shook his head wearily. "So many people say that, now..."

"Yes... I'm sorry."

"Why didn't you make your suspicions plain before?" Barakat bit her lower lip. "I didn't trust anyone."

"Even me?"

"I thought you might be working with him."

"Dr Barakat!"

"And Peke and Salabi. The spying charge... I thought we – they – were being set up."

Adenuka took her hand, squeezed it. "Why should anyone want to do that?"

She looked at him, searchingly, for a moment. "No reason. Natural paranoia."

"If we'd wanted to do that... wouldn't we have just accepted the accident report?" said Adenuka. "No, strange as it may seem in these cynical times, our duty is to a higher ethic than the well-being of a corporation or its officers, no matter how mighty or how big the investment..." He stopped, as if embarrassed. "Be that as it may, as you can imagine, I'm not very popular with GC, disrupting operations. Nor will I be with the people Vannan was spying for, when their reputation is tarnished." He gazed down the corridor as if looking into the future. "But my authority and my discretion are absolute."

Barakat looked around to see if anyone was listening. "Arbiter," she said, low. Then stopped.

Adenuka smiled. "Is there something else?" he said.

She bit her lip again. She seemed burdened with worry, as if carrying something that she wanted to put down.

"I didn't realize the power of the arbiters," she said, finally. "It makes me proud, somehow. I knew it was going to be tough out here. I'm glad there are people like you to patrol the deeps."

She turned as if to go, but reluctantly. Adenuka gently put a hand to her shoulder. She turned back to him. He looked deep into her eyes.

"That wasn't it, was it, Gabi?" he said, a tiny smile touching the corners of his mouth. He looked into her eyes. She seemed on the verge of tears.

"If Vannan was spying..." she said. "Well, that is odd. A coincidence." She stopped again, biting her lip.

"Gabi. There is something you would like to tell me." She let a long breath out.

"Kolade... Doctor Teiss told me not to tell anyone. Absolutely no one at all." She looked at him intently. Adenuka felt she was searching the lines of his face for something, and apparently found it. She nodded to herself, as if she'd made a decision. "Things have changed."

She leaned close to him. "Is there anywhere we can go where we will be private?"

"The interview room? It is shielded..."

"No. I need to show you what Kolade Teiss was really working on."

"Your office, then? Or his?"

"In the field."

They left early next morning. It was good to get outside, away from those endless poky rooms and white labs and dully-lit corridors. Once he had heard where "the field" was, Adenuka decided they should take his ship. Technically they would still be stuck inside a small control cabin, albeit one with panoramic screens, but he felt a palpable sense of liberation as Gabi drove him back up to the landing apron, away from the domes, and Dau Peke and Vannan and all the sniping workers in their hutches.

He could almost taste the high thin air at the back of his throat, feel the wind in his hair and the sun on his face. The silvery lines of *Extreme Clarity* reflecting the golden earth in the morning sunlight was a joy to see and it made him glad to be alive. And he was not too old to appreciate the wide-eyed look Gabi Barakat gave when she saw the ship for the first time.

"Wow," she said, muffled in her oxymask, as she parked the tank near the fire depot. They clambered out and for a moment Gabi could only stare.

"We'd better get on," said Adenuka, gently, and took her by the elbow to guide her across the apron. He beamed like a proud parent as they walked towards the ship, his ship: her long nose sharp and questing, her power pods and weapons bays holding unimaginable energies.

"Impressive!" said Gabi. Two swept wings and a sleek fuselage completed the picture. *Clarity* was nothing like standard functional spacecraft, which by comparison were clunky power stations in the sky.

"This is just the sort of ship I imagined when I signed up for survey work in the first place!" said Gabi, sounding like he felt, a prisoner let out, cheerful and carefree.

It was good to get her away from the claustrophobic, paranoid warren of the research base. Adenuka smiled. "If you find you're unsatisfied with your current career, you could always apply to join us..."

Gabi turned, surprised.

"People come to the service from all backgrounds," he said. "Few were actual city-police foot officers."

"I suppose so... hadn't even thought of it."

They stepped up the ramp, Gabi almost reverently, as if entering an ancient temple. And once inside, the main cabin was indeed like some high altar, full of lights and screens and burnished metal and fat comfortable G-seats and elegant, ergonomic controls.

"I don't believe it," said Gabi, running her hand carefully over a highly-polished brown material on the command chair arm. "Is that wood?"

"Yes," said ainode, coming to life, to Gabi's surprise. "Though I am not made of such material myself. It is purely decorative."

"Don't be so dismissive, ainode!" said Adenuka as he checked the air and removed his oxymask. "We have a guest."

Gabi looked at him quizzically. "Just my ship AI," said Adenuka. "He's virtual crew."

"Don't be so dismissive yourself," said ainode, actually sounding huffy.

Gabi laughed. "I love it!" she said.

Adenuka smiled as he sat in his comm chair. He suspected it was the first time Gabi had laughed for ages. Still, they had work to do.

"Better get strapped in," he said sounding like a concerned parent.

Perhaps too much.

"Oh, sorry, of course." Gabi clambered into a seat alongside and fumbled with the strapping. When she was ready she breathed out, then looked over to Adenuka and gave a thumbs-up sign.

"You had better give us the coordinates," said Adenuka and ainode, simultaneously.

Gabi reddened.

Within half an hour *Extreme Clarity* was descending from the edges of space, flying over a wide plain towards a pair of blasted mountain ranges nearly half a world away from the survey base. Gabi's eyes were shining.

"How do you like the ride?"

"Fantastic," she said. "We could have used this." She shook her head. "If we'd had a ship like this instead of that tank, then they'd all still be alive. And..."

"And what?"

"Arbiter, you will see soon."

Through the viewscreens they could see the harsh, sandy, rocky landscape rolling by. From their vantage point thousands of feet above, the land appeared anonymous, like the surface of a hundred thousand worlds of rock eroded by sun and keening winds. They drifted slower, over the first mountain range, revealing a high valley between it and the next range.

The ship came to a hovering rest a thousand feet high and a thousand feet away from a crumbled cliff.

"Right," said Gabi, tense. "We're almost here. Can we translate... Right a little... down a bit; down; down. Left, left. STOP!"

Gabi stared at the viewscreen and turned to Adenuka. "Do you see?"

Adenuka peered into the screen. "I'm afraid I don't quite..."



Gabi jabbed a finger, pointed at a dark shape.

"Magnify, ainode," said Adenuka.

The image area under Gabi's finger zoomed, a dark semi-circle becoming more obvious. The entrance to a cave, or tunnel.

"It looks very symmetrical," said Adenuka. "And artificial."

"And big... though you couldn't get the ship in there."

Adenuka stared at the screen. "Did Dr Teiss carve this?" But he knew the answer.

"No."

"Did anyone on the research base?"

"No. Nor on the reconnaissance, survey, or first landing."

"Then... Perhaps you had better show me."

Adenuka directed ainode to land the ship as close by the valley wall as it deemed safe. Then he and Gabi, masked up, wearing heavy boots and carrying flashlights and rope, descended the ramp and headed across the smashed rock towards the mysterious cave.

"This was Dr Teiss's first real clue," said Gabi, breathing hard as they clambered the last few feet. They stopped and stood gazing up at the opening, perhaps 30 feet high, the tunnel disappearing into inky blackness.

"Of what?" said Adenuka.

"His first clue that this planet had once harboured intelligent life." She looked at Adenuka, almost challengingly, he thought. "The first evidence of intelligent life we have ever discovered anywhere in the Universe."

Adenuka shivered, as though he could feel some chill from the depths of the planet. He felt almost paralyzed. But Gabi walked on, into the darkness. Adenuka followed her as she strode further in, shining her torch on the ancient tunnel walls.

"Dr Teiss found it through personal analysis of satellite imagery after processing," she said, as if conducting a student seminar. "Can't leave everything to computers. He then made a one-man field trip out here. He knew the political and commercial implications of such a discovery. Not to mention cultural... Didn't want to get others involved. Into trouble." Her voice tightened. "Into danger."

"Yes," said Adenuka, finally. He stopped, turned and looked back briefly at the bright light streaming in from the narrow entrance. "I understand that. He did get you involved, though."

"Eventually. Me. And Dawn Ray, his assistant. She was also killed."

Gabi walked on, into the darkness. Adenuka found he had to resist the temptation to scurry to catch up.

"But not Dr Erica Sobhy? Your boss? She also... died."

"No. Not her. Not anyone else."

"Are you utterly sure? What about Vannan?"

"Vannan? Certainly not."

"Dr Teiss may not have told you everything..."

"But—"

"People can have hidden sides, you know."

They had to stop. The tunnel was almost blocked by rock, but it did not look like a natural roof fall.

"There's a narrow way through, deeper inside..."

Adenuka shook his head. "I am not as young as you."

Gabi sighed, staring at the wall.

"Absolutely no one else here knows. But we sent the info out encoded, by tightband, buried; looped, linked, packet-switched, embedded, stegged, you name it. Soon the nearer Worlds will know, and then everyone. And it'll be too late to suppress."

"So Dr Teiss believed — you all believed — that if this information was issued publicly, through normal channels, it would be suppressed. Its originators destroyed."

"He was right, wasn't he?" said Gabi, sadly. "He knew how the world worked. General Construction have spent a fortune investing in this place. They wouldn't want to give up millennia of revenue stream, bring the whole project to a halt, for the sake of some archaeological dig." She turned and grabbed Adenuka by his jacket. "It doesn't matter to them that it is the single most important cultural discovery in our history!" Her torch shone in her eager eyes, making them glint. "But they didn't count on an Arbiter being here! Think! Proof that we are not utterly alone! Proof that other civilizations have lived and may still live in the Universe!"

Gently, Adenuka prised her fingers off.

"Sorry," said Gabi, abashed.

"I'm convinced." He indicated the rockfall. "What do you think this place is, exactly?"

"A high-level nuclear waste storage tomb. It's a granite batholith, geologically stable for hundreds of millions of years."

Adenuka shook his head. "So, *life!* And not simply some squitty little rock microbes."

"And given the condition of the world, the loss of the oceans, all life could have ended here aeons ago..."

Unbelievable. Who among those ancient alien builders of this structure — little more than a sewer for a nuclear septic tank — could have imagined that other people would follow them, hundreds of millions of years in their future?

"Who were they? What were they like?"

"Well, that's hard to say."

Adenuka bent down, picked up a stone, weighed it in his hand. "Did they originate here, or come from somewhere else?"

"We think — Dr Teiss thought — from here. From this earth and rock and sand. And water, when there was some."

Adenuka touched one wall. He could feel nothing through his gloves, but he imagined the planet once throbbing with life. Like his own world, Stodon, the Garden World. And everything now turned to ashes and dust. A self-indulgence... he could not afford to drift off like that. Still, this was a rare privilege indeed.

"Sorry, Gabi. Why did he think that?" And he remembered something. "You said this was the first clue to intelligent life. It's a pretty big one, but what others are there here?"

She paused. "The other big clue is not on the planet at all."

Adenuka sensed a note of jubilation in Gabi's voice.

"What do you mean?" he said, carefully.

"It's on their moon. We found their lunar base."

Adenuka's eyebrows rose. That was a surprise.

They upped ship as soon as they could get back. Gabi gave the coordinates and ainode was planning a trajectory out of the atmosphere and on to the slow-revolving moon even as the ship took to the air in a blast of lifting force.

Traffic control – Dr Ren Vu, in fact, on duty today – contacted them to declare that off-world travel had been banned and where the hell did they think they were going?

Adenuka let ainode report that they were in fact the Arbiter's ship and it was rescinding the grounding order in this one case; it even apologized. That satisfied the ground, and they heard no more.

Gabi smiled. "There seem to be many advantages to being an Arbiter. Among them the re-writing of rules to suit yourself."

Adenuka laughed. "Yes, Gabi. But of course we try to act responsibly."

"Of course." She nodded, and bit her lip. Perhaps she was embarrassed, or nervous. She stared at the viewscreens.

Adenuka turned to watch too. The airless satellite loomed, implausibly fast as the ship made good time. The place looked unpleasant and dangerous, a strange beacon for primitive people to try and reach. He wondered briefly about those mysterious aliens who'd made this journey incalculable ages ago. How long had it taken them, what vehicles and power systems and communications had they used? And what had they thought when they looked back on their own birth-planet for the first time, their feet planted on a new world?

And where else might they have gone? Throughout this system?

Out to the stars?

No. If they had made it that far, surely they would have survived. And perhaps prevented us from achieving our own destiny, pre-empting our existence by colonizing the galaxy, planetforming our own home worlds. Snuffing out our lives before they even started. Usurping our destiny. Good thing for us they have gone extinct.

Or perhaps they're still out there somewhere, waiting, sleeping.

Or uplifted to some higher realm, even, that hoary old idea which explained to the ignorant where all the teeming civilizations that should have filled the galaxy and the universe must have gone.

He felt a chill.

"Excuse me," said ainode. "We are landing. Please ensure you are secure."

"That was quick!" said Gabi.

They stepped out into the airless landscape, swaddled in pressure suits. The bright sunlight scattered off the land, harsh and glaring. Up in the black sky the amber world they'd just left hung, a thin and mysterious crescent.

With no audience to impress, Adenuka did not bother with his theatrical walk-around of *Clarity*. He did glance at her, though, as they set off. She was an impossibly shiny silver, utterly strange and modern in contrast to

this primal land that had remained unchanged from near the beginning of time, and yet essentially the moon and the ship were made of the same constituent elements. The difference was the organizing power of intelligence; such a rare occurrence in the universe.

He turned to go after Gabi, who was already loping towards a low hill. She was following other tracks and footprints, dark grey against the light soil, as though they were wet. He caught up.

"I take it these are Dr Teiss's tracks?"

"Yes."

"No one else?"

"Not for ages. I mean really ages."

"Not even you?"

"No! If I had gone offworld... well, it would have been noted."

"You seem to know your way around..."

In answer, Gabi tapped her head. "I memorized the data and the images. Safest way."

Adenuka looked round. "And no tracks from the, ahh, original visitors?"

"No. Bombardment by micrometeorites and cosmic rays obliterates everything eventually. According to Kolade, even at their original landing sites there was nothing left to see, except a slight chemical change in the surface soil..."

Gabi slowed as they came to a looming cavern carved into the low hill. It was obviously as artificial as the tunnel they had investigated earlier, but smaller.

"What is this, another nuclear dump?" said Adenuka.

"No. The main way in to the base."

"And if there were no visible clues, how did Dr Teiss find this place?"

"There are clues." Gabi waved her arm across the landscape. "Hard to see now, from this level, but several of the outlying structures of this establishment are clearly geometrical, designed, and made of long-lasting materials. They were pinged by the detailed mapping survey Dr Teiss undertook."

"Pinged, identified – and suppressed, I suppose."

"Yes. And no."

Adenuka stood there, looking at the tunnel into the hill. Millions or hundreds of millions of years before strange creatures had stood here, looking down on their birthworld and outwards to the stars. It was hard to believe, frankly. Now, all that apparently remained was this simple monument.

"Let's go in," said Gabi. "I think I know the way..." She turned on her helmet lamp, and led into the gloom. Adenuka turned his light on too, and swung it round as he walked, sending it bobbing over the smooth rock surface. Every now and then the light shone in through a dark opening to a room beyond. For some reason, he felt an extra chill, as though there were ghosts in these black corridors and hiding in the dark corners. In fact, it reminded him somehow of the General Construction base down on the main planet, swept of people.

"To confirm, Dr Teiss was absolutely sure the builders came from... from... down there. 274-C."

"From Churned? Yes," said Gabi.



"No chance they were outsiders, like us – from far away? Some observation post?"

"No. For a start, of course, we have never encountered such a people. The set-up seems too small. And finally..." Gabi paused.

"Finally what?" said Adenuka, after a bit.

"We're coming to that." Gabi stopped in front of a doorway and seemed to check it, mentally. She turned and looked him in the eye. He noticed her eyes were shining, and she was breathing deeply... it looked as if she believed she was about to receive some spiritual revelation. "This is the key evidence. This is the single most amazing artefact we could possibly have hoped to find."

Adenuka stared back at her. She turned, and walked in through the doorway. She turned up her light power and raised the lamp to splash over the far wall.

At first, Adenuka could not make out what he was looking at. But eventually it resolved itself into some kind of deliberate visual image, a collage of sorts, interlocking pictures and graphics carved deep into the rock-face, perhaps with a laser. A work of art and information, but hard to read.

"It's great to see it for real," Gabi breathed. "We've made some preliminary analyses," she continued, more businesslike. "This commemorates not the Churneders' own world, as such, but their pioneering visits here, to this moon."

She pointed at one section. "That's a bipedal alien in a pressure suit, out on the surface. This could be one of their first explorers..."

Adenuka stared. He had to take her word for it.

Gabi indicated a large circular graphic. "This is undoubtedly a map of the satellite, with what we think are the initial landing sites or bases marked. We've investigated some of them... that's how we found the chemical markers."

"And this?" said Adenuka, pointing at a small rectangle enclosing two other circles filled with irregular shapes and surrounded by geometric patterns. "Another map?"

"Yes. A map of the hemispheres of Churned. As it was when it had oceans. It fits. Despite the geologic changes, we can make a correlation."

Other sections of the fresco, explained Gabi, showed images of primitive spacecraft, and a representation of a planet that could only be Churned as it once was – and would be again, Adenuka reminded himself: a living world, viewed from space.

It struck him that this image probably represented this entire people's one and only real mark on the universe. It was as though all the history and evolution and energy and industry and power and life and hopes and myths and dreams of their planet had combined to raise a pyramid of endeavour that had resulted only in this – a drawing on a cave wall on a dead satellite. The work, the culture, the civilization implied by this one image and where it stood was staggering.

"We have enough now," said the ship ainode, suddenly, booming in their helmets. "Arbiter, you may terminate the interview."

"Ainode..." said Adenuka, suddenly uncomfortable.

"Just a moment. There must be more to find out."

"No. The investigation is finished. Terminate."

"What's going on?" said Gabi.

"I am sorry, Gabi," said Adenuka.

"Sorry for what? What did he mean?"

"The investigation I am conducting – it was actually into these reports of alien life Dr Teiss had made..."

Gabi looked confused. "You knew already?"

"Yes."

"But what about the spying charge... and Vannan?"

"Vannan certainly killed Dr Teiss and the others. If he had known about you, he'd have killed you too. But he was obliterating the evidence... clumsily."

"What do you mean?"

"We knew about some of Dr Teiss's findings. They were intercepted by the base aicore and out-system ship ais. They will never get out to the wider world. They were why I was sent. To shut down any remaining avenues... Because the lives of billions of people will not come to be if we do not colonize this system."

"Arbiter," said ainode. "There is no point. Why discuss it with the witness?"

"Because we are people, and we tell stories to one another!" said Adenuka. He waved at the ancient collage lasered into the wall. "This connects us to them! They told stories to explain what is happening! We're more like them than we are like you, ainode."

"It is not policy. Terminate her now. We must get back to base."

Adenuka drew his pistol. Gabi's eyes widened.

"This is not the first time alien life has been discovered," said Adenuka. "It is in fact the fourth."

"I don't understand!"

"I am sorry, Gabi," said Adenuka. "Really I am. I wish things could have been different."

"What are you doing?"

Adenuka fired, twice, straight at her face. Gabi's helmet shattered and her skull exploded in a froth of red mist. She fell back and to the floor slowly in the low gravity, unstrung.

"I'm sorry," said Adenuka softly, to himself. "All right, ainode," he said, louder. "I'm ready. What action do we take on Churned?"

There was no answer from ainode. Adenuka stood in the strange silence, gazing at the carving on the wall.

"Ainode? What is the decision on Dau Peke and Vannan? Salabi and the rest of them?"

But still there was silence, for long moments. It was very unlike the ship ai to act like this...

"Sorry," ainode said, finally. "Policy is developing in view of this moonbase. We are terminating all of them... it is safest. A shepherded comet will obliterate them all. Once the aicore is backed up, of course."

Adenuka sucked in his breath. "I am getting too old for this business," he said.

Ainode was silent again. Adenuka stared at the collage on the wall as if trying to burn it into his memory: the maps of the world and the brave alien pioneers in their primitive ships little better than toy sailing boats on a vast ocean.

Then he turned and took a step towards the exit, back to *Extreme Clarity*. He suddenly wanted to go home, put his feet up, retire and look at gardens, and never have to arbitrate in another wild sector of the diaspora again.

The tiny ship-status screen fixed inside his helmet suddenly bleeped. Adenuka glanced down to read the data, and stopped in surprise.

"Ainode! Why is *Clarity* lifting?"

There was a brief moment of silence from ainode. Then: "New policy coming through."

Adenuka started to run. But too late. A series of hammering explosions smashed the moonbase, Adenuka and the ancient picture and turned them all to tiny bits of dust.

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**Nicholas Waller** was born in Beirut in 1958. His previous stories are "The Travel Agent" (*Interzone* 130), "Frame by Frame" (*IZ* 138) and "Vanguard" (*IZ* 142), and it's good to welcome him back after too long a gap. A peripatetic publicist (and storyboard assistant on the movie *An American Werewolf in Paris*), he spends some of his time in France, as well as occasionally in Hollywood, where his brother Anthony is a film director. His home base is in Wedmore, Somerset.

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# Disorder in the Head

*Zoran Živković*

**M**iss Emily opened the door to the first-year classroom at the girls' boarding school. The quiet murmuring of 26 freshmen subsided and they all stood up as though by command. They were wearing identical navy-blue dresses that went down to the mid-calf and buttoned up to the chin, completely plain, without the least embellishment. Even the buttons were covered with the same blue cloth. Only the white collars of their blouses interrupted this uniformity, varying slightly in shape. Not a single girl wore her hair down; they all wore braids.

Miss Emily's brown dress was of the same plain cut as her students' uniforms. There was a small broach pinned to its left side that almost blended into the background. Her dark hair, streaked with grey despite its lingering thickness, was pulled back in a bun. Her tiny eyes gazed mouse-like through her round wire-framed glasses. The low heels of her high-topped shoes did not add much to Miss Emily's height. She was still shorter than most of the 16-year-old girls who were now waiting, motionless, for the signal to sit down.

She went up to the desk and set down a stack of papers and a leather glasses case. Her eyes passed over her students and she nodded briefly. The room was filled with the rustling of dresses and scraping of chairs, and then she too sat down. She set her spine firmly against

the back of the chair, from where it would not move until the end of the class, as though glued in place. Only her head in lively movement would be at variance with this stiff body.

First she concentrated on arranging the objects in front of her. In addition to those she had brought, there was a small vase containing two purple wildflowers, a wooden pen-holder, a long thin pointer, a large globe, and a glass half filled with water, covered with a linen napkin. She did not strive for any special order. The priority was that everything be lined up, to offset any impression of randomness. She abhorred disorder, both external and internal.

"Good morning, young ladies." Her feeble voice matched her stature.

"Good morning, Miss Emily," chimed 26 voices all together.

"I hope you slept well. From what you have written I can see that some of you are not getting the rest you need at night, particularly at your age."

She stopped talking and laid her hands on the pile of papers in front of her. It was a collection of dreams. Whenever she commenced teaching a new class, the first thing she did was have the freshmen write down their dreams of the previous night. This was the best way to get to know them. Nothing spoke more eloquently about the girls than what they dreamed. This was where they

showed their true nature. In addition, dreams are the first indication of the disorder that threatens to overwhelm young minds. And it could only be thwarted if discovered in time, before it seriously corrupted the personality. After that it was very difficult, perhaps even impossible, to remove.

Of course, there were always freshmen who would try to deceive her. They wrote inauthentic accounts of their dreams, resorting to invention for various reasons. Some simply had not dreamed anything or could not remember their dreams, but were reluctant to admit this. Others were ashamed of their dreams. The most dangerous, however, were those who made them up in order to outsmart her. Those were the girls in need of special attention. Such duplicity was a clear sign of a wayward disposition. What she found additionally offensive was the fact that they underestimated her. As though it were easy to deceive her! With experience measured in decades, she was able to recognize without fail not only false dreams but those calculated to poke fun at her.

Among the 26 papers that had been given to her at the end of the last class, she was certain that three belonged to this latter type. They were all signed, but since she still didn't know the girls, their names meant nothing to her. All the same, she would soon see which of the young ladies considered themselves smarter than her. Nothing would teach them a better lesson than to experience a little public humiliation. They had to find out immediately that they would reap what they sowed. There could be no leniency in this regard. This was the only way to put them on the right path.

She took the first sheet from the pile and turned it over. At the bottom, next to the girl's signature, Miss Emily had written a great warning sign in red ink: three horizontal parallel lines cut by a vertical line. She used many similar symbols, with meanings known only to herself. Generations of freshmen had done their utmost to break these codes, but none had succeeded as yet. To make them even harder to decipher, Miss Emily periodically introduced confusing changes that made sense only to her: new signs appeared and old ones changed their meaning.

"Will Miss Alexandra please stand up."

At the penultimate desk of the row next to the window a willowy girl with large eyes and prominent cheekbones stood up. Miss Emily examined her carefully. Not at all unexpected. These freshmen who get their height early are the first to have swollen egos. They think they are special because they are taller than their classmates and nicer-looking. As if that could make them superior! But she had a remedy for such fervour.

"Ah, that's who you are. Fine." She put Miss Alexandra's paper to one side and then took another one from the pile. "Now would Miss Theodora please be so kind as to introduce herself."

A plump girl in the third desk of the middle row slowly stood up. She had red hair with curls that not even the tight braids could straighten completely. Her face was sprinkled with freckles. Miss Emily raised the collar of her dress a bit around her neck. She didn't like freckles

at all. They were a mark. There was always a reason for them, as shown this very instant. It was, of course, no accident that she had singled out this girl's dream.

"There you are. Very good." Miss Emily held up a third paper with a warning sign on it. "The last one to introduce herself is Miss Clara."

A short girl wearing thick glasses stood up in the first row, at the desk by the door. Her head was bowed and her right hand was clutching the three middle fingers of her left hand. Strange, thought Miss Emily. Of all the freshmen this is the last one I would have suspected. She could almost recognize herself some 40 years ago. But experience had taught her how deceiving appearances can be. Even though Miss Clara seemed the epitome of modesty, what she had written clearly indicated that that was merely an outward impression.

"All right. Now would the rest of you girls please take a good look at the three who are standing."

This caused a stir. The girls who were sitting started to look around in bewilderment, staring at the three standing girls, who were just as confused. Several neighbouring heads drew together and whispered. Miss Emily let the uncertainty gain momentum. She had put on this show many times and knew exactly when to speak again.

"You don't see anything unusual?" she asked at last. All the faces turned towards her. "I don't blame you. There's nothing that can be seen. One would say there is nothing special about Alexandra, Theodora and Clara. But this is not so. There are things that cannot be discerned by the eye because they are hidden. Terrible things that are not the least fitting in the honourable individuals that we all hope you will become after you leave this school. One such thing is the penchant for lying."

Miss Emily paused so that her words would make the proper impression.

"This is a very bad characteristic. It is particularly dangerous when it appears in younger individuals. A girl who starts to lie early in life will most certainly not stop there. What inevitably awaits her is a wayward life of even worse sins. All lies, however, are not the same. Although no lie can be justified, some can be understood to a certain extent. Let's take, for example, your compositions on what you dreamed. Almost half are not true. You thought you could fool me, but that, of course, is impossible. I am quite capable of telling real dreams from false ones. I do not hold it very much against most of you, though, this resort to fabrication. You did not act out of ulterior motives. You found yourselves in an awkward position and lying seemed the only way out of it. You will learn in time that sincerity always serves you best in any difficulty you might encounter."

Miss Emily took the pointer and started to draw it back and forth through the closed fist of her left hand.

"But the motives of these three young ladies were not in the least naïve. Their fabrications were fully intentional. They treated me condescendingly, wanting to show their superiority. Arrogance went along with the lies, and it is hard to find a worse combination. They were convinced that I would not see through them, but they have greatly underestimated me. Now the time has



come to face the consequences. It is always unpleasant, but cannot be escaped. In any case, it is for their own good. Confession and repentance are the first steps towards redemption and healing."

The pointer stopped moving. A hush filled the room for several moments.

"So? Let's hear what you have to say."

It was not clear which of the girls was expected to speak first. Miss Alexandra glanced questioningly at Miss Theodora, who replied with a shrug of the shoulders. Miss Clara kept her head bowed. Her eyes had become glassy and wet. The tears had not yet started to flow, but it was certain that nothing could stop them. The tension in the classroom grew along with the look of impatience on Miss Emily's face.

"They didn't lie."

The voice was soft and came from somewhere in the back. A multitude of braids swung when the inquisitive heads quickly turned around to look. Miss Emily twisted her neck.

"Who said that?"

The girl who stood up at the last desk in the middle row did not stand out in any way. She was thin, with dark hair and regular features, quite common among the uniformed girls. Only her eyes set her apart. Miss Emily knew about such eyes – and didn't like them. Behind their clarity, vivacity and penetrating power stood a character that was most difficult to handle. Wilful and persistent, it resisted submission and moulding, and served as a very bad example to the other girls. She had to be cautious from the very start.

"What is your name?"

"Miss Irena."

The name sounded familiar to Miss Emily. She had taken notice of it while reading the girls' compositions on their dreams, but forgot why. She took the pile of papers from the desk and started to leaf through it. She had gone through about one-third of them when she suddenly remembered. The paper she was looking for was at the very bottom. She had left it there, intending to address that case at the end, after finishing with the ordinary ones. It was quite unusual. Over the years she had received a wide variety of compositions, but it had never happened that a girl would turn in a paper with only a signature and nothing else.

"Ah, you are the one. Very nice. And this was your dream?"

Miss Emily raised the empty sheet of paper so all the girls could have a good look.

"Yes."

"Should we conclude based on this that you didn't dream anything?"

"No, you shouldn't."

"So that's it. You did have a dream, but for some reason you did not consider it necessary to inform us about it. Would you perhaps tell us the reason?"

"I did tell you the dream."

"You told us? I don't see any report here. Does any of you freshmen see better than I do?"

She began turning the page over slowly from one side

to the other, making an arc with it in front of her. The question was not directed at anyone in particular, but several girls nonetheless briefly shook their heads.

"It's mist."

Miss Emily's mouse-like eyes immediately squinted.

"I don't think I heard you too well."

"That's mist," repeated the girl from the end of the middle row. "I always dream about mist."

"You dream about mist?"

"Yes."

Miss Emily put the pointer down, then adjusted its position a little so it was parallel to the edge of the desk.

"Very interesting. You only dream about mist? You must be very bored when you sleep."

"I'm not. There's another dream."

"Oh, there is? So why didn't you write about that other one?"

"Because it isn't mine."

"It isn't yours? Then whose is it?"

"Someone else's."

"How can something in your dream belong to someone else?"

"It's no longer my dream. The mist suddenly disperses and I enter someone else's dream. I dream what others dream."

Miss Emily looked at Miss Irena for several moments without speaking.

"My dear, I have heard all manner of concoctions from freshmen during my many years of tenure at this school, but I must admit that you have outdone them all. Do you really expect us to believe what you just said?"

"Yes." The girl's voice was even, as though confirming something quite ordinary.

"And just why should we believe you, might I ask?"

"Because it is the truth."

"How can the truth be that you dream other people's dreams? Has anyone else ever heard of something like that?"

Her eyes swept over the class, but this time not a single head moved. Miss Emily felt awkward. The conversation had taken an unexpected turn and she no longer had complete control. She had to put an end to this nonsense as soon as possible.

"I think that's enough now," she continued. "I must warn you that you won't get very far with such stories. A rich imagination is not greatly appreciated here. Other virtues are fostered in this school."

"It's not my imagination. If it was, how would I know that these other girls aren't lying?"

"Of course they lied. I should think I'm the best one to know that. And you are no better than they are. You have not only concocted rubbish, but stubbornly insist it is true."

"I can tell you their dreams. I dreamed them along with them."

Miss Emily's first thought was to resort to her tested procedure. Miss Irena should leave the class at once and report to the principal. Such impudence had to be properly punished. As a lesson to the others. But if she did that, she would be admitting defeat. She had been offered

a challenge and had to reply. In any case, why not? Let the girl say what she had to say. She would only embarrass herself. Of course she could not know what the three girls had dreamed. Particularly since these weren't their real dreams, but fabrications.

"All right then. Let's hear. It will give us a fine chance to see that lies are always short-lived."

"Miss Alexandra dreamed that she was in an asylum for the mentally disturbed after a traffic accident in which she hurt her head. She had terrible visions that frightened her. A doctor came to visit and she told him about her visions, but he didn't believe them. Miss Theodora dreamed that she was skiing. An unusually dressed man sat next to her on the ski lift. He explained that he was not there by accident. He had come to see which path she would take to ski down the slope. For some reason this was very important. Miss Clara dreamed that she was a clairvoyant. A young man came to her parlour with a strange request. He wanted her to confirm that he only had a short time left to live."

When Miss Irena finished, the girls kept their heads turned in her direction several moments longer, then all turned towards Miss Emily. Only Miss Alexandra and Miss Theodora continued to stare at the last desk in the middle row. All that broke the silence was the sniffles and sobs of Miss Clara, who had not moved since she first stood up.

Miss Emily's face flushed with anger. There had always been girls who considered themselves smarter than her, at least in the beginning, but something like this had never happened before. This was a true conspiracy! Four of the freshmen had plotted to make her look foolish. Fine! Now they would find out just what they were up against.

"Did you really think this would work? That I am gullible enough to fall for your ploy? That I would believe this nonsense about dreaming other people's dreams, when there is a far simpler and more natural explanation? You found out that I always assign a composition about dreams at the first class. This is no secret, in any case. Then you cleverly planned this whole thing. Three would write invented dreams and one would ostensibly know about them. Your plan, unfortunately, didn't succeed. In order to outsmart me you should have devised something much more convincing. Now you will all go..."

"I was in *your* dream too."

Miss Emily quite disliked being interrupted in the middle of a sentence. In any other situation she would have severely reprimanded a freshman impertinent enough to do such a thing. This time, however, there was no reprimand. Staring into the clear eyes at the other end of the classroom, their composure irritating her most of all, she picked up the pointer again. She held on to it tightly in the middle with both hands.

"Really? You did me the honour of visiting my dream too? And just what was that dream, if you please?"

"The one you dream all the time. Night after night. The dream about the old woman whose alarm clock is broken and she goes to the watchmaker's..."

The crack of the dry wood breaking in Miss Emily's

hands echoed so loudly that several of the girls flinched. Miss Clara raised her tear-streaked face in fear.

"Enough! We don't want to hear your drivel any more. Leave at once and report to the principal. You others sit down. I'll take care of you later."

The three girls quickly took their seats, but Miss Irena did not head for the door.

"It wouldn't be a good idea for me to go."

This was refusing to obey. Miss Emily had given an order and it had to be carried out without question. But suddenly her destabilized authority did not seem so important.

"It wouldn't? You don't think, by any chance, that we will miss your company?"

"You will. In a way. If I leave the classroom, it will cease to exist."

Miss Emily stood up slowly. She had never done this before in the middle of a class. Without the chair back, she felt somehow without support, as though floating. She put the two parts of the broken pointer on the desk, briefly bemoaning their mismatched appearance, their slightly different lengths.

"We had no idea that someone so important was with us."

"I'm not at all important. Quite the contrary. I am very secondary. This is not my dream. I am only a guest in it, as usual. But when I leave it, the dream will cease to be. All of this will disappear. There is nothing on the other side of the door but mist. Do you still want me to go and report to the principal?"

The classroom sank into silence. Miss Emily could almost feel the girls' eyes on her: confused, questioning, expectant, frightened. Had she been alone with Miss Irena, she might have given another answer. This way, she had no choice.

"Yes. That is a risk that we must take."

Miss Irena walked along the aisle with slow steps. She reached the door and put her hand on the knob. She stayed like that for several moments, as though pondering whether or not to say anything, but she didn't say a word. She turned the knob and the door started to open.

Miss Emily did not see what was on the other side. She quickly turned her head the other way and stared out the tall windows at the sunny summer morning. She kept her eyes turned in that direction as the door slowly closed behind the girl.

Translated from the Serbian by Alice Copple-Tosic

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Zoran Živković, who lives in Belgrade, Serbia, completes his five-story sequence *Steps Through the Mist* with the above tale. (And all are now available as a small book of that title published in his homeland.) The previous stories in the set are "Geese in the Mist" (*Interzone* 182), "Hole in the Wall" (issue 184), "Line on the Palm" (issue 185) and "Alarm Clock on the Night Table" (issue 186).



## ANSIBLE LINK-1



DAVID LANGFORD

Our tireless correspondent Michael Moorcock is convinced that that 10 Downing Street reception for children's authors (see previous column) was a grave political error. "Sorry to hear the kids' writers were rounded up by the Blairs to get smuggled. I expect Tone and Cher to feature in various guises as hypocritical villains in future juve epics. This could affect voting patterns for decades to come. Dangerous liaisons..."

## THE UMBRE TESTAMENT

Ray Bradbury was interviewed for *The Writer*, January 2003. Doubtless you've been itching to know what the old master thinks about contemporary science-fiction authors: "...I do not read those writers. [He laughs.] Well, first of all, I don't read them because when you're working on a novel, you are always a little worried that somebody else has already had that same idea. And then also because I can't really find any love and passion in what they write."

Ursula Le Guin has been named as SFWA's 20th Grand Master, with a formal presentation to follow at the Nebula ceremony in April. • On 6 December she led a 50-strong peace march in Portland, Oregon, and delivered a writers', editors' and artists' petition against war on Iraq to a local congressman.

Terry Pratchett committed trilocation on Saturday 7 December. That weekend, several hundred fans attended festivities celebrating the twinning of Wincanton, South Somerset, with Discworld's Ankh-Morpork – featuring a sausage-and-mash feast so oversubscribed that it was split across three separate pubs, two of them supplied with proxy Pratchetts (in authentic hats lent by the man him-

self) to entertain and propose the toast after dinner. All for charity... Conspiracy theorists may link this story with a curiously inept press release from StarCity Entertainment Centre in the Midlands, promising showings of a recent film entitled *Lord of the Rings, Twin Towns*.

Jeff VanderMeer poses a question which had not occurred to me: "Why are there so many entrances to hell in the UK?" He's been looking at [www.entrances2hell.co.uk](http://www.entrances2hell.co.uk) / ...Not for nothing was our late Queen Mother known, in her giddy youth, as Buffy.

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**As Others See Us.** A change from the usual litany of contempt for sf and fantasy! Novelist Joanne Harris of *Chocolat* fame, asked to choose her six favourite books for *The Week* (28 Dec), came up with a distinctly fannish selection: *The Gormenghast Trilogy*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Salammô*, *Lolita* and Zelazny's *A Rose for Ecclesiastes*. • Meanwhile, for those unsure of the precise genre of *Star Trek: Nemesis*, a Salisbury cinema sign reveals the answer: "Roman-tic Comedy."

**Glittering Prizes.** Philip K. Dick Award for US paperback originals: here's the shortlist. Carol Emshwiller, *The Mount and Report to the Men's Club and Other Stories*; Kay Kenyon, *Maximum Ice*; Karin Lowachee, *Warchild*; China Miéville, *The Scar*; Jeff VanderMeer & Forrest Aguirre (ed.), *Leviathan Three*; and Liz Williams (who like *Interzone* lives in Brighton), *Empire of Bones*. • UK New Year Honours. Ridley Scott was knighted. Peter Ackroyd (whose literary fantasies include *Hawksmoor* and *The House of Doctor Dee*) and Brian Cox (an actor with several TV sf credits, including *Red Dwarf* and *The Cloning of Joanna May*) received the CBE.

**Sic Transit Gloria.** "Neil Gaiman? Don't know who he is..." Thus Graham Norton on Channel 4, as he scanned a website that listed famous ex-residents of East Grinstead.

**R.I.P.** Nicolai Mikhailovich Amosov (1913-2002), Russian-born engineer, heart surgeon, keep-fit pundit and author whose "sleeper awakes" sf novel was translated in 1970 as *Notes from the Future*, died at his Ukraine home on 12 December, aged 89. • Thomas E. Fuller, US author of several short fantasy and horror stories since 1990, died on 21 November aged 54. • Ian MacNaughton (1925-2002), director of almost every episode of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and of the first Python film *And Now For Something Completely Different*

(1971), died in Munich on 10 December following a car crash; he was 76. In an earlier acting career, he appeared in the sf film *X The Unknown* (1956). Paul Barnett remembers: "He was one of the nicest, friendliest of men. It's little realized that, without him and his faith in this oddball new series, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* might have had an extremely hard job making it to the screen, if at all... I've always regarded him as the extra, uncredited Python."

• Glenn Quinn, Irish actor who played the half-demon Doyle in the first series of *Angel*, died early in December aged 32. • Kenneth Tobey (1919-2002), US actor who appeared in more than 100 films and played a lead role in the classic *The Thing From Another World* (1951), died on 22 December. He was 83.

**Kiddy TV Scandal.** "Teletubbies. The friends play a game explaining what it is to be 'on top' and 'underneath'." (*Radio Times*)

**In Typo Veritas.** *Book Trade News Digest* reported a financial coup on 13 December: "Rare Harry Potter book sells for 000. / A woman who bought a Harry Potter book for 99 today sold it for 000 at auction."

**Golden Oldies.** Reacting to endless hype about the Best Young British Writers promotion, Radio 4's *Front Row* instead chose the top ten over-70s, including Brian Aldiss, J.G. Ballard and Doris Lessing.

**Did Your Mother Throw Yours Out?** A copy of the first issue of that venerable UK children's comic the *Beano*, dated 30 July 1938 and one of only nine known to exist, fetched £7,500 at auction last month.

**Thog's Masterclass.** *Kessel Run Dept.* "By the way, we don't talk of speed in space," he [Professor Lucius Brane] explained. "We speak of it only in terms of gravity – so many gravities." [...] "We are now on the cosmic jets at one twentieth exposure. At full exposure you would be travelling at not less than twelve gravities, which in terms of speed would be very fast indeed." (Captain W. E. Johns, *Kings of Space*, 1954) • *Dept of Pleonasm.* "Truth had at last become time-urgent." (Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread*, 2002) • *Secrets of Invisibility Dept.* "We came to your world as fugitives from a great planet that once formed part of the solar system – a planet composed entirely of ultra-violet substances..." (Clark Ashton Smith, "The Invisible City," 1932) • *Legend of Sleepy Hollow Dept.* "I rolled my head to an empty quadrant of the hall." (Richard Morgan, *Altered Carbon*, 2002)



# "Paris, Texas"

*Martha Wells*

*interviewed by*

*Jayne Lynne Blaschke*

**T**exas fantasist Martha Wells arrived on the publishing scene with a flourish in 1993 with *The Element of Fire*, a finalist for the 1993 Compton Crook/Stephen Tall Award and a runner-up for the 1994 Crawford Award. Since then, she has produced such notable works as *City of Bones*, *Death of the Necromancer* – a 1998 Nebula Award nominee – and, most recently, *Wheel of the Infinite*. Currently, she is at work on a three-book series set in the mythical realm of *Ile-Rien*, with the first instalment, *The Wizard Hunters*, due to hit bookstores in July of 2003.

*You've used Western European cultures in your works, and Middle Eastern desert cultures as well. Wheel of the Infinite, however, is altogether different. What prompted such a departure?*

I've always been interested in Angkor Wat, which is the basis for it. For a long, long time, ever since I saw one of the *National Geographic* articles on it – where it had the map of the city and talked about the city – I'd always wanted to do something with that culture. It was just its turn. I finally had the chance to do that, and it really seemed to fit.

Also, I'd noticed I had totally ignored religion in my last three books – the religious aspects of the cultures. I wanted to explore that a little more, so that fit in real well.

*As you developed the religious aspect, how did that evolve from what your original concepts were? Did you surprise yourself?*

Yeah, I think I did a little bit. I've always been interested in architecture, and one of the things about Angkor Wat is that the architectural layout is based on and governed by religious symbolism. There's just some really interesting things about it. I got into it from that angle. I think that helped a lot.

*Since incorporating religion into your fiction was a goal for Wheel of the Infinite, did you base the spiritual elements on a pre-existing religious tradition, or did you develop your own?*

I used Angkor Wat and developed my own. I just used it as a jumping-off point. I really didn't have the time to research Angkor Wat enough to do it right and actually use that religion. But using it as just a jumping off point, to make up my own society and base everything on Angkor Wat – I was able to do that.

*Apart from the religious aspect, how does Wheel of the Infinite differ from your previous works?*

It's the only one that has a female main character who is centre-stage most of the time. The other books had female characters, but they were secondary. There was usually a male character and a female character, and the female character was really secondary. With *Wheel*, she was the main focus of the book and there was a male secondary character.

Also, one of the things I wanted to do with *Wheel* was to write a book where the hero was an older woman.

That's because it seems in so many fantasies – I've seen them where there are older men now, in their 30s or 40s – but it's just kind of like TV. As soon as an actress hits 36, that's it for her. I wanted to show an older heroine.

*Your work is mostly High Fantasy, but the settings aren't your standard cookie-cutter fantasy realms. You have a French Renaissance-style world in Element of Fire, an Arabian Nights-type of setting in City of Bones...*

It's really not *Arabian Nights*. It's just a mix of all kinds of desert cultures.

*So then, what is your mindset going into world-building? Do you specifically set out to create a certain type of world, or does it evolve during the story process?*

Kind of both. I set out to create a certain type of world, but once I really start going on it, it might evolve in different directions. I think *Wheel* evolved. The world there evolved in different directions as I got more into it.

*How have your fans responded to your body of work? In fantasy, there tends to be a pressure to produce "the same, only different." You've branched off in a lot of different directions.*

Well, I think the reaction's been okay. Because *Element of Fire* and *City of Bones* were so different, people who've been with me from the beginning kind of knew and expected something would be different. I've seen on the

Amazon.com reviews, people say "I really, really loved *Necromancer* and *Element! City of Bones* and *Wheel* were okay, too, but I really loved these other two." And then it's the exact opposite: "*City of Bones* and *Wheel* were great! But, you know, *Necromancer's* just okay..." So, I don't know. I guess there are always going to be new people who, if that's the first book of yours they find and read, they're going to be shocked when the next one's different. The people who've been with me for at least one or two books take it in stride.

*Death of the Necromancer isn't a sequel to The Element of Fire, but they're set in the same world, share the same timeline. Both books stand alone. You don't see that very often in fantasy. What were the benefits, and drawbacks, to doing that?*

I think there were a lot of benefits to it. Usually, when I develop a city, I really like to give it a feel that it's had a past, developed over time and not just sprung up. It's the difference between when you go into a new neighbourhood or an old neighbourhood. With a new neighbourhood, you can tell streets are exactly symmetrical, all the lots are the same size. It doesn't look natural. It looks like it was just put out there, as opposed to some places you can go where the streets are all windy and things have been torn down and new things put up. You can tell it's changed over time.

I think, especially in fiction, I really want to give the feeling of reality, that I'm describing a real place. And real places, real cities, evolve constantly. You'll even see new places now, small towns that have sprung up, will evolve very quickly. Places where people live change very quickly. Especially when you're talking about a city like Vienne in the *Ile-Rien* books. It's based on Paris and London. You're talking about occupation sites that've been there for hundreds of years. Places that started out as small little camps and have just grown up enormously.

So, the benefit of using the same setting, but setting it forward in time, I was able to use all the development I did in *Element of Fire* already. And then extrapolate based on... the model I used was Paris. If you notice in the book, Vienne has had a similar building spree as Paris did at that time, where they came and they tore out all the old medieval streets, redid everything to make it nicer. Well, in Paris they did it so that people would stop being able to block the streets during riots. They made the streets wider so they couldn't put up a couple





of wagons and bring the entire town to a halt, which is one of the things they were doing during revolts.

Instead of coming up with all that new background, you can build on what you've already done. You don't have to reinvent the wheel every single time.

*You're taking that a step further with your current project.*

Yeah. Actually, the main character is Nicholas's daughter. It's set maybe 30 years in the future from *Death of the Necromancer*. But *Necromancer* was kind of late-Victorian, and this is going to take place in sort of a World War I time period. We've got more cars in use now, and electricity. Mostly electricity instead of gas.

*What do you run into when you're dealing with an obvious fantasy world, and introducing technology, too? In most fantasy worlds, the technology never changes no matter how much time passes.*

I don't know, because I've never written the other kind of fantasy. I don't know if this is a greater kind of challenge. To me, this is an easier way to do it. For one thing, especially in the *Ile-Rien* books, magic is just another aspect of their technology. And it develops. I try to show that it develops along with that. I think there've been some books where people speculated that if a society had magic, they *wouldn't* develop technology, but the kind of magic in *Ile-Rien* has always been based on ceremonial magic. It's not particularly easy to do, and it's not something that everybody has. So, I could see it affecting the development of technology – particularly their medical technology. Since they use a lot of magical elements in healing, they will probably never have to develop the kind of medical technology that we have just because they won't need it. It'll be replaced by other things.

*Is it more challenging to have the world constantly evolving? Does it demand more of you, as a writer?*

I don't know if it's more challenging or not. Once you develop it as a method and a technique, you don't really think of doing it any other way. I've always felt that being able to do research gives me a bit of a crutch. That's one thing with *City of Bones*. I wasn't basing it on any particular society. I was mixing together a lot of stuff from pretty much every desert culture I could think of. When I was trying to think of a way they would do something, I had to come up with it

on my own. I was really feeling the loss of that template. With *Ile-Rien* stuff, I can just go pick up a book on whatever it is. If I need some sewers, here's a book on Paris sewers in the 1800s, and that's everything I need to know. I can embellish and go on and add the magic and the fantasy, but I've already got the basics there. In *City of Bones and Wheel*, where I'm more out there on my own, making stuff up as I go along, I don't have that kind of resource.

*How has your anthropology degree played into your writing? Is it particularly suited for a fantasy writer?*

I think it matters a whole lot. I really don't see how you could write fantasy – world-building fantasy as opposed to contemporary fantasy – where you're creating your own world without some kind of method of historical thought, or method of anthropological thought. I almost think anthropology is more useful, especially if you're creating original worlds as opposed to trying to write a historical fantasy actually set in a real world. Because what anthropology teaches you to do with archaeology, is to look at the culture to try and figure out where everything came from. At least that's what we did in southwest archaeology.

You seldom have a lot of remains. A lot of times all you'll have is a midden. So all you've got is their garbage, and you have to figure out where this stuff came from and who they were trading with, based on the few things they had that they threw away. It teaches you a holistic approach to culture. It's like, "I want to write a story

about a warrior." Instead of just looking at that aspect of it, you have to really think of the forces that shaped him. When I'm building a world, I'm really worrying about where they get their food and if I want them to wear leather, what will that mean? It means they probably have domesticated animals. And if you're dealing with anything set in a fairly hostile environment – if your setting is pastoral countryside, then it's not such a big consideration, but if you're dealing with anything set in a more hostile environment, you really have to think more about where they're getting their materials. You can really slow yourself down with it, too: I want to have silk drapes here. Well, where do they get silk? Wait, that means silk worms. Okay, we'll have to have trade because it's going to be pretty far away... This is the stuff you can distract yourself with when you should be writing.

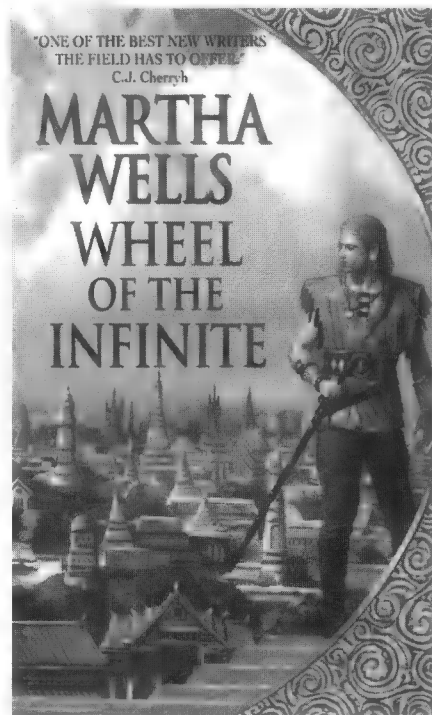
*That covers a lot of the thought that goes on behind the story. What about the writing process itself?*

Oh god. I actually do something that a lot of writers don't do. I write with the TV on! I've always been used to a lot of distractions, because the first nine years of my career, I wrote when I was at work. I worked as a systems operator and programmer for the Ocean Drilling Program at Texas A&M. It was me and my boss in a very tiny office with two Wang mainframes, and a lot of other equipment. Of course it got very hot with the computers, so we had to have a gigantic vent and air system in the ceiling that would just pour in cold air down on top of you and was also very loud. I think it really affected my hearing. We were both pretty much deaf by the time we got out of there. We had four or five PCs and a Mac in there, and I used to do all my writing on the Mac while I was waiting on calls to go up and fix stuff.

*So all that noise and commotion didn't stifle your creativity?*

Writing with distraction has never bothered me. I saw something on a TV show, a mystery, where this guy was pretending to be a writer. He was a suspect or whatever, and someone came up and said something to him. He's like, "Never interrupt a writer when they're working!" I'm like "Well, I wish! Geeze..."

So I learned to sit there and have conversations with people while I'm writing. I work part-time now, and I don't write on the job any more because I've got too much to do. But when I'm writing at home I'll sit there



with my laptop – usually in the bedroom because I like to spread research material out, and it's easier to spread it out on the bed – with the TV on. I'll usually have it on something that doesn't involve me. Something that won't attract too much of my attention. Movies that I've already seen. American Movie Classics and Turner Classic Movies. Old movies. Black-and-white-movies. They will kind of keep me company, but won't engage too much of my attention. Of course, then you get stuck when something like *12 Angry Men* comes on, and that's two hours down the drain right there! Old "Perry Mason" reruns are really good for writing.

*Do you know how the story is going to unfold before you start to write, or do you discover the story as you go along?*

It depends. Sometimes if I know mostly what I'm going to do in the chapter or the scene or whatever, but I'm still having problems, there's things I still have to figure out about it, I'll skip around a bit and kind of

write the bits I do know I want in there, and make notes almost. I keep adding more and more bits until eventually I get everything figured out – I can go straight through and tie it all together. And then sometimes, if I've got a good idea of the scene, I'll just write the scene straight through and not have to do that.

*In Death of the Necromancer, you filled the story with lots of literary allusions. Is that something you set out to do? Were "Easter eggs" planted there for readers to find?*

No, I didn't really plan that. They just kind of happened. Well, the Sherlock Holmes stuff was definitely planned, because I wanted Nicholas to be a Moriarty figure. Except he's that really scary thing – he's the criminal with self-control. If he *wanted* to be bad, he could be really, *really* bad and do an incredible amount of damage. But the other allusions were not really planned. It was spur-of-the-moment. I think the *Les Misérables* stuff came in because, well, I wanted to use the sew-

ers. There's a really good description of Paris sewers in the unabridged version of *Les Misérables*. One of the things Victor Hugo used to do was walk through Paris in the old, medieval byways. A lot of that is in that book. A lot of descriptions of areas that were torn down by Haussmann during his building project. So that was a really good source for that period.

*For all intents and purposes, City of Bones was a post-apocalyptic fantasy, but you've had readers approach it differently, viewing it as science fiction. Does that surprise you?*

Yeah, it does. Even when the book was first proposed, and we were trying to sell it to Tor, they said, "We don't want Martha to write a science-fiction novel. We really want another fantasy." My agent said, "You know, if you talk to Martha about it, you'll find that it *is* fantasy." A lot of people assumed that because it talked about a war, a cataclysm, this was automatically a nuclear cataclysm because there couldn't be any other kind of



cataclysm except a nuclear one. Well, this was a *magical* cataclysm. The world that was there before was another fantasy world. The artefacts that the characters were finding were tiles – painted tiles and things like that. So I couldn't understand why people thought apparently 20th-century America was buried under these piles of rubble, and all the people were coming up with were painted tiles. You know, "They aren't, like, bathroom tiles?" I don't know what people were thinking of.

I think it was just people putting a label on the book and not really looking at the evidence that was there. I didn't want to come out and describe what kind of world it was before the holocaust, because my characters didn't know what kind of world it was. That was their life's work, putting together the few bits of evidence they had about this previous world. And they had very little to go on.

*So how did you get into writing? Did you always know you were going to be a writer?*

Yeah, I did. Well, I didn't always know I was *going* to be one, but even when I was a little girl I used to write stories about Godzilla and things I saw on TV shows. *Land of the Giants*, *Lost in Space* and things like that. So yeah. It

wasn't until I got into college that I realized I *could* become a writer. That was when Steve Gould was still living in Bryan [Texas], and he was still doing science-fiction writing classes and workshops through "Free University" which used to be the community free classes thing where they taught bar-tending and cooking and languages – all kinds of things. And people would make extra money by teaching these classes, and Steve was teaching science-fiction writing. That was the first time I'd ever met a real writer. Then I met Rory Harper, and he's also been one of my mentors for years. He was doing a writers' workshop in Houston at the time, and now he's moved back to Bryan so we're still working together that way, which is great.

*It must also be great to have your fourth novel nominated for the Nebula Award. What was your reaction when you found out Death of the Necromancer made the short list?*

Oh, that was really strange! I totally did not expect that. It was getting nominations, but I think it only had a couple or three by that time. So if there was going to be any chance for it, it was going to be on the next year's ballot. When it ended up being put on by the jury, that was an incred-

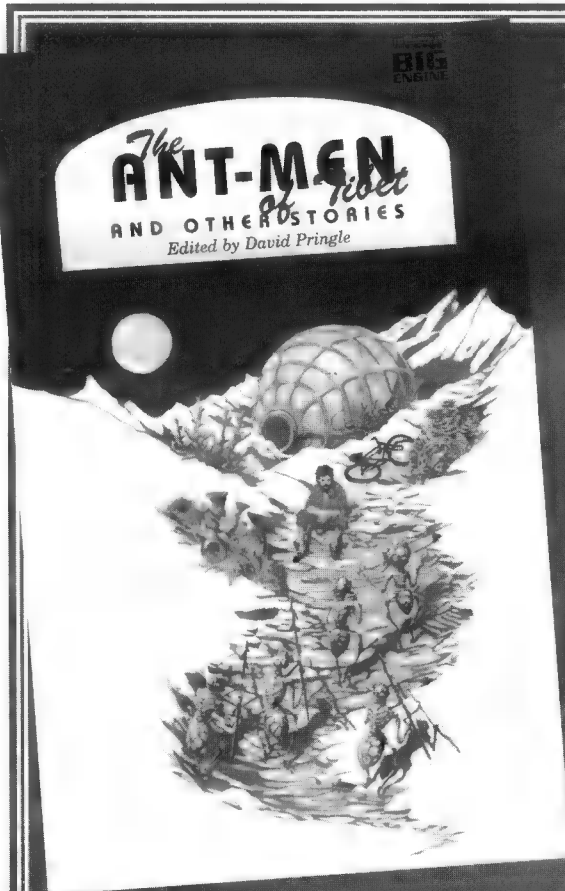
ible shock. My editor called and told me, and I'm like, "Oh, okay." Later on we were talking, and she said "I knew you didn't believe me." She'd called me at work, so I sat there for a couple of minutes, then I got online and looked at the *Locus* web site. They had the nominees, and I was on there. I was like, "God, it's true!"

I kept thinking I must've heard her wrong, that must've not been what she said.

I don't know what impact it's had on my career. I think I'm still emotionally dealing with the shock of having it end up on the list, anyway. I don't know if it's helped my career much or if it's had any impact on it. I don't know exact records of my sales, either.

*If you were given carte blanche by your publisher – no strings – what would you write?*

Pretty much the book I'm writing now, I think. I've been real lucky with Avon. All they asked for was a book on a bigger scale. I'd been focusing on one city, one place, and they really wanted to see something bigger. They wanted a big fantasy, but they wanted me to do it my way. They still wanted it to be a Martha Wells book. And so I'm like, "Okay, I'll do my best." **[Z]**



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# GOD IN THE BOX

*Nick Wood*

Michael knew exactly how to irritate me. Even when I controlled myself, pretending to be cool, he knew I wasn't. And the amazing thing was – he could even anticipate the evolution of new pet-hates of mine. From dirty socks in the bath to toilet seat in the up position to concerned talks from teachers whom I agonizingly hoped would never ask what I do for a living.

I needed to remind myself that *I* was the psychologist. And Michael was just my 14-year-old son.

Today, he threw his school bag across the room as he came into the kitchen. Buckled and zipped, the bag scraped over my newly-laid perfect wooden floor. It felt as if it had scraped my skin. I grimaced, back turned to him, trying to control the harsh words struggling to burst out. Behavioural extinction was needed. A dead-calm lack of response.

"Stop doing that, Mike!" I snapped as I turned.

He'd already slouched on a kitchen stool, face dark and sullen, heavy-bodied. My response made him smile slightly.

Bugger. He'd won the opening salvo.

"What, Mum?" His feigned innocence was designed to rub it in even further. This time, I managed not to rise to the bait.

"Never mind." I felt tired and dispirited. "How was your day at school?"

"Fine..." I don't know why I still persisted with that hoary opening line, except that I really did want to know.

He worried me with his silences and air of detachment. I opened my mouth to try and raise a discussion. Anything. Any words that might bring us closer.

There were so few words at the end of my day. There was so little to make sense of my life any more. Why did I always feel so cold, even with the heating turned way up?

The phone rang. I sighed.

Upstairs, I knew Jack was probably reading the paper, with no intention of talking to us, let alone responding to the outside world. I could feel his silence leaking down the stairs as I made my way into the hallway.

"Hello," I said, "Dr Brandon."

"Dr Brandon? It's Major Stone." The voice was big and absolute. Great, it's *the* Major. I still had to smile every time he used his first name, though.

"Hello, Tom."

"Yes, well, *Eva*, we have another case for you to look at urgently."

His voice sounded different suddenly, strangely tight

and anxious. "We need you to section a policeman who says he's been given God."

I was aware Michael had come into the corridor and hovered behind me, breathing heavily.

"I'm sorry, Tom." I was sure of this one. "Religious belief is beyond my clinical jurisdiction." *Not another evening call-out, please!*

"I don't think you understand, Dr Brandon. He claims to have found God. We've got both of them locked up."

I started a bit, uncertain as to whether I had heard right. "Uh – what exactly are you saying, Major? You've got God there as well and you want me to section them as *both* insane?"

He gave off a deep chuckle – most unusual for him. "No, Doctor, just the policeman will do, and—" His tone hardened. "You must report to the Institute straight away to do this – we are afraid of a serious evangelical epidemic."

I turned to look at Michael. He hadn't heard anything, but he knew.

"I'll make my own dinner."

I felt a pang. He looked so resigned and distant.

The Institute – Bayford Military (B.M.I.) – was not that far.

It was based in a large old mansion house – screened by trees. The B.M.I. had been established as an army research lab – one of about 20 throughout Britain after the Terror Wars – to document the human and military fall-out from the war.

My job was to assess the human side. I generally had to evaluate what mental and neuropsychological damage was manifest in the military, and occasionally civilian, population. One of the perks of employment was that I was paid extra to be "conservative" with disability assessments involving compensation suits from soldiers following the Wars.

I guess that's why I was still in a two-bedroomed terrace on the outskirts of London. It could be worse, I thought, sweeping up the long dark driveway to the grey-stone building; at least it's close enough to my other job, lecturing at the Uni.

Major Tom (smile) Stone was a tough military man, but a damned fine scientist too, specializing in neurobiology. (He liked his science hard too.)

He had a lot of clout at the Institute and was the liaison person for neuropsychological assessments. Me, I was just one of several external consultants they pulled in. They had offered me a full-time permanent post once, but I'd turned it down, for fear of seeing the Major every day.

Not that he was bad-looking. He was a smallish man with a tight handshake, and razored grey hair on top of his sharp, finely-featured face.

But over the years I'd wanted to see him less and less, only trapped by my need for work.

Deep down, he scared the shit out of me, to be frank.

"Certify God?!" I deadpanned to him, after I'd tried to squeeze his hand and my terror as hard as I could.

He waved me to a chair. I could see an open blue file on the desk.

He'd come around his desk to sit opposite me: no phys-

ical barriers in this session, then. No apparent need for the file, all the details internalized in that steel-trap brain of his. I could feel the skin chill on my face.

"Well, the copper thinks so. And we've taken possession of – uh, it. God. Whatever."

"It?"

"What he calls God – a meteorite from space, we guess. But it's a bloody unusual one."

"How so?"

He shrugged, taking out a box of cigarettes.

*What an archaic and disgusting habit for a man so bright...* I shook my head.

He glared at me briefly, hesitating, and then slowly smiled, lighting up. The smoke puffs he sent out were angled and not quite close enough to my face for an official complaint. "Well," he said, drawing in for a third time and finally looking at me again: "Geologically it's a unique specimen. We're still trying to analyze data, but it looks like there might also be a strange organic compound encased within. We're concerned about contamination and radiation, so we have it securely locked in quarantine."

"So it's a funny rock with stuff in it – perhaps a relic from the Terror Wars? It's a huge leap from that to God."

He smiled wryly: "The policeman's word, not mine. The copper says that's what the person before him said too."

"What person?"

"We haven't been able to trace her yet. Some young woman brought the rock in to the station when the PC was on desk duty one night, claiming to have found it in a field, but saying by rights it belonged to the whole world... because it was God."

"And then?"

"The copper laughed at her and told her to piss off. Then he touched it."

"And—?"

"He's agreed with her now – suddenly and wholeheartedly. When he told the Station Commander, they sealed the Station, suspecting terror contamination, and shipped the stone off to us. Well shielded. The rock arrived in the same van as the copper, PC Pridom."

"So you haven't found this woman or the field where she says she found the stone?"

"No, she's gone, as if she's fallen off the face of the earth." He moved uncomfortably in his chair. He stubbed his cigarette out and flicked it into the bin next to him.

"Or as if she's ascended to heaven," I suggested.

He wrinkled his nose. "Fun-nee! She may well have had outside help disappearing, leaving us with a potentially lethal mind-altering hot potato."

"Neuro-biologically?"

"Nothing. The policeman's been through an extensive quarantine. There are no signs of any disease, contamination or illness in him. We haven't a clue yet as to possible pathogenic vectors, so we've sealed the bloody thing in a vacuumed anti-radiation box."

"So it's safe to talk to him – PC Pridom?"

"Surely," he said. "That's if he'll talk to you." He got up and walked over to the door, hesitating for a moment to light up again. I tensed, waiting for something. Sure

enough, he turned to me with raised right eyebrow and a direct stream of smoke from his mouth.

"And you'd better bloody deliver! I would have got Watts or Browning in if they'd been available."

Sure, I thought, *men!*

Standing quietly behind the door, blinking, stood a large man with a greying square head. He was dressed in brown med-military overalls.

"Peter Pridom, meet Dr Eva Brandon." The Major waved the policeman inside with a sweep of smoke from his right hand and left, closing the door behind him.

"Pleased to meet you, Doctor." The policeman stood quietly, thick arms dangling limply by his side.

I picked up his file which the Major had left on the desk. They hadn't put the policeman on any meds as yet, it seemed. He was 35 and single. It was a bit late for the onset of psychosis, but perhaps he was vulnerable with a lack of social supports?

I gestured him to sit, but he continued to stand. "I don't want to waste your time," he said.

"You're not wasting it," I said. "They're paying me for this."

"It's still a waste," he said. "I can see you don't believe me. Your mind has ruled out God, right from the start."

"Welll..." I was hoping to tap into his delusional system, "Perhaps you can persuade me?"

"Sorry," he smiled slightly. "I don't think so. What are words worth to a mind not open to them? And—" he pointed at the file in my hands: "You've got me all in there anyhow."

It was not what I expected a policeman to say. I closed the file and put it back down on the desk.

He continued to stand quietly, eyes watching me closely, with a soft smile on his lips.

"Tell me what convinced you this – object – was God?"

"Not the woman's words when she brought it in," he said. "I thought she was a homeless nutter at first. It was first her touch – I could see she meant it – but mostly it was the touch of the Stone."

"So *you* touched it?"

"Yes." He looked down, "But there's no way anyone's going to touch It now. They'll see to that – especially the Major."

I think *he* must have been listening somehow. (He bugged his room himself no doubt.) The door opened and the Major stood there, as if on cue. A helmeted soldier was with him, an escort for PC Pridom, to take him back to his quarantined quarters.

But I wasn't finished yet: "Why did the stone come to you, Peter?"

I waited for the reply. Would it be because he was the son of God, or perhaps just His special prophet?

He gave a small shrug and turned to leave. "I was just lucky, I guess."

*Just lucky!* I smiled, even though I was alone with the Major again.

The door closed hard and brutally behind him.

"Gave you a hard time, did he?" the Major asked, with a

small hint of satisfaction.

I didn't even bother to reply. "I need to see the stone, Tom."

He frowned. "You work with people – or so I thought! Or do you think you'll get more from a stone than you got from the copper? You're not a psycho-geologist, you know."

*What an irritating chuckle.*

"Let me just have a look, Tom." It was late and I was tired. I wanted to see the stone. And I needed to get home to Michael. "I'm a scientist, whatever you may think. I need primary, not secondary, data."

"Your job is to certify him. How is seeing the stone going to help with that decision?"

I looked at him. His jaw was jutting belligerently. It would be so easy to not fight, but just go home and call it a night.

But I knew it would be a quiet night, empty and cold. Michael might be asleep by now – and Jack would have no words for me.

That policeman had felt... euthymic, not manic or dysphoric.

Euthymic – just pleasantly happy. There was no psychotic edge I could sense to his brief mental-state evaluation.

And I needed to see why.

"Show me Tom," I said, tensing myself, "or else I can't sign anything."

His look was cold and long, the silence threatening. "Fine," he said at last, "but then you sign his sectioning papers and we finish this whole bloody thing."

I don't know what I had expected.

The stone was held in a small grey steel room with an armed guard outside. It was sitting alone in a translucent box of indeterminate substance – approximately a yard cubed – surrounded by blinking sensors and computers. The stone itself was contrastingly black and absorbent, showing no flicker in response to the array of light around it.

It was just a few inches in diameter.

I wondered whether it had a history of being thrown through people's windows. It looked as though it was just the right size and shape for the palm.

"So," said the Major, turning to look at me, "what..."

He had no time to finish the question. I'd stepped forward and touched the box. It felt like hard fibreglass. Except it was warm – wonderfully warm.

He grabbed me back.

*In slow motion?*

*Like a movie.*

And I thought: yes, you're such a good scientist, why do you have to be such a shitty man? And what do I need to do to get Mike and Jack together and talking again? And how can I make my work and life meaningful like it used to be when I was younger?

And I had the sense that all these questions could be answered if I only trusted myself and the world around me just a little bit more.

*Somehow, perhaps, just a little.*



“Stupid!” The Major’s face was twisted and hard, furious.

His hand was tight on my arm. It hurt, so I stepped on his instep as hard as I could, with my high heels. He shouted and let go.

*He’s just a bully!* No clever psychodynamic formulations flowed to mind. *He just likes to push his weight around.*

And then I realized I was no flyweight myself.

My fear had gone.

He scowled sidelong at me as we headed back to his office, gesturing abruptly at a chair when we entered. This time he sat behind his desk. Hugely solid and strong, it created a gap between us.

“What the hell was that all about?” he snarled.

“Primary data.” I paused. I had the feeling that things were tying together somehow, that there was a pattern here: I was not just exposed to loosely random events, over which I had no control.

“So?” He spat the word.

I didn’t even hesitate. “I think Pridom *may* be right.”

He barked, throwing his head back in threatening laughter. “Are you so impressionable? Listen, Eva – I touched that bloody thing too – really touched it, not just when it was sealed, like you. It’s just a weird rock.”

“Then why are you so frightened?” I asked.

He stopped and looked at me with that look that usually made me feel frightened and dried my words. But this time I didn’t feel a shred of fear. I stared back at him.

“Come on Tom,” I said, “We’re scientists. We’ve got to leave a little room for uncertainty.”

“Your field is a lot more uncertain than mine,” he said, “and your scientific objectivity has been compromised.”

I think I knew a little more why the policeman had said so little to me. But I tried again.

“Science doesn’t always have to explain everything.”

“It’s done pretty well so far,” he shot back. “To call the unexplainable ‘god,’ is to work with an ever-shrinking god of the gaps.”

“Perhaps that’s why God has come to earth? Squeezed out of the heavens by a rampant science?”

“Listen to yourself, *shrink*,” The word was used contemptuously, and I knew a line had been crossed. “You’re saying this stone is like some bloody broken-off piece of Kubrick’s 2001 monolith that was floating through space. That’s pure fucking science fantasy, let alone science fiction!”

“Clarke,” I said.

“What?”

“It was Arthur C. Clarke’s 2001 *Odyssey* first.”

He stood up. “I don’t give a toss. Please sign these forms. You will be well compensated for this.”

He threw the yellow certification forms across the desk at me, and they slipped onto my lap. I picked them up and looked.

He’d already filled them out in carbon triplicate. The diagnosis was “paranoid schizophrenia.” There was a little cross where I should sign at the bottom, as if I’d never done this before!

So, it all came down to this: writing my name. That

was all I had to do and I knew I would not have to worry about whether the bits and pieces I got from lecturing would be enough. Just a little scratch on paper and I could order a new couch set to match my wooden floors in the lounge.

*But who would sit on them?*

I looked at the Major, hovering angrily over the desk, and crumpled the papers up, slowly and deliberately. I dropped them into the bin next to me.

He shook his head and held out his hand: “I’m sad it’s come to this.”

I knew it was the final handshake. This time I didn’t bother to squeeze hard. It didn’t matter.

“Goodbye, Eva. We no longer have need of your services.”

*If I’d taken the permanent post he couldn’t do this to me. Perhaps I should step back from the brink? Jack will never go back to work to help me and we need the money.*

*No, a label is for life. Ethically there is no choice.*

He opened the door. “Do you know what you’ve done, Dr Brandon? There are some neuro-chemists here who are looking for ways to market this rock. What the hell am I supposed to do with world peace, hey?”

Ah, so there was the rub.

It was about three months after Bayford had fired me that I arrived home from the University, exhausted after the latest RAE – Research Assessment Exercise – visit. There was a parcel on the kitchen table. Jack must have signed for it.

It was squarely wrapped in brown paper, with my name hand-written in neat penmanship. Featureless brown, the parcel rattled slightly when I shook it. The postmark was London. I didn’t remember ordering anything from London.

Shredding the wrapping, my fingers were tingling as I exposed a small grey box, stamped with a company name. Theologica Pharmaceuticals.

Ah! A drug company. And we psychologists were still awaiting the new bill for basic prescribing rights, in the face of the fading few psychiatrists left in the National Health Service. A pre-emptive strike it seemed, by an alert company, into a pending new market.

Except, when I look at the accompanying letter attached to the box, I realized I was just a potential customer.

*Dear Doctor Brandon,*

*We are a new subsidiary of Bayford Military. We believe you are already familiar with the elements of God that have fallen from the sky and are therefore conducting an initial survey on the confidential and limited list of “people-in-the-know.” We have confirmed after extensive tests that there are no harmful effects and that there may be some veracity to the claims that God is somehow organically resident in this element. Out of our Company’s extensive civic duty we have diluted this compound into tablet form, as a means to spreading the joy of the existence of God. This is the first stage of market research.*

*Please take this pill with our compliments and give us independent feedback as to the relative blissfulness of your experience. (Form enclosed.)*

*This will be invaluable when it comes to allocating a fair price if and when full publicity and marketing becomes possible.*

*Please note that the Military currently retain ownership and any (even singular) negative experience will result in Bayford destroying all remaining batches.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*<squiggle>*

*C.E.O. Theologica Pharmaceuticals / Bayford Military Institute, Ph.D. (Neurochemistry)*

I looked at the box. It was white and plainly marked in black Gothic print: "God-Pill."

There were brief instructions on the outside of the box: "Please take one every 24 hours in the event of nihilistic feelings or if in prolonged existential crisis. Possible side-effects: excessive euphoria."

It took me a while to open the box. The damned thing seemed designed not to be opened, as if reluctant to reveal its contents. Then I noticed my hands were shaking.

It was a small green pill – green as in life, organic-like. *Black pills don't market well?*

And I could sense whispers of something through my fingers. I cupped the pill in my right palm. It was small, almost lost in the lines and folds of my palm.

Small, yet potent, and promising much. *Imagine the experience if I took it into my stomach – what would be the impact on my nervous system? They must have already found out, if it has reached this stage.*

I wondered where the human guinea-pigs were now. What were they doing?

But then an inkling of doubt, a vague sense of paranoia, crept into my thoughts. *Are they perhaps trying to get rid of me?*

I sniffed the pill.

The company was small. It receded from my mind. Even the military was faltering. I sensed the Major wanted this destroyed, but it was clambering out of its box too fast. Too many people had felt it. God?

Or was it Pandora's Box?

I sniffed again.

No. I didn't think so. It smelt like the end of war. Where was the evil in that?

But the Major would try and destroy the batches. "Any singular negative experience..." And experiences could be created.

I knew suddenly and certainly, he would let nothing of the stone or its organic compound survive.

And there would be nothing but rolling the Sisyphus stone of work and family up the hill every day.

If I took this pill, perhaps I could save It. Save everything?

No. What a messianic joke! I couldn't change it all on my own... But at least for some hours perhaps I could feel as if I had touched the Face of God?

I raised the pill and opened my mouth.

I saw my black fillings and gold tooth coyly hidden in the back of my mouth.

Startled, I realized I was looking at myself in the bathroom mirror. How on earth did I get here? The last I remembered I was in the kitchen with the parcel. I must have walked up the stairs without thinking, just as I often drive down a well-known route, suddenly conscious of the arrival place with no clear memory of the journey.

My face looked old in the mirror, wrinkling fast these past few years, but at least my eyes were still bright.

*I grow old; I grow old. Faint poetic memories... I have no trousers to roll?*

And the toilet was open. *Seat up yet again – bloody men!*

The toilet was open. *Like my mouth. Calling.*

I hesitated, desperately wanting to feel that connection with God again, that sense that my life was meaningful and worthwhile and had a plan leading it forward to some lasting purpose and joy. I just needed to swallow that little green God-Pill.

But I suddenly realized why the toilet seat was calling.

My arm and hand shook with the agony of the decision. *It's madness to throw it all away. It's not as if my life is steeped in ongoing transcendent experiences of the divine.*

But somehow – I hoped – it had to be the right thing to do. I didn't want tiny dosed pieces of God. I wanted more – the whole shebang. That was why the woman had brought "It" to the police station in the first place. She wanted to share God with everyone.

It didn't seem right for me to take a piece alone, like a sliver of acid, to fly for a while only to come down again, with God gone.

Most of all I dreaded the sense of being left with nothing.

So it felt as if I was flushing my own soul away as I leaned on the toilet lever and watched the green pill being swallowed up in a pool of suctioning bubbles, the pan draining to leave...

I peered forward, hoping against hope the pill was too small to have gone.

No.

It was gone. The toilet bowl was empty.

I couldn't believe I'd just flushed God down the loo.

Michael found me still sitting there, on the edge of the bath, peering into the toilet.

"Eh? What you looking for, Mum? What you dropped in the bog?"

I looked at him. He didn't seem to notice I'd been crying. "Nothing, Michael. Nothing."

"Oh!" He stood in the doorway, momentarily undecided, bag hanging over his shoulder. Then, taking the plunge, he turned and threw his bag along the wooden hallway. I heard it scuffing and banging along the passage, thumping suddenly against a closed door.

I opened my mouth to scream blue murder at him.

And shut it again.

He looked like he always did. Face dark and sullen,

heavy-bodied. Except that I sensed some sadness from the day in his thoughts too. It was as if he had trailed them in behind him. Just wishing he could hurl them over my neatly new wooden floors like his bag.

"You've had a bad day, son?" I asked.

He started slightly, looking at me hard suddenly: "Eh – what's that, Mum?"

"You've had a bad day, haven't you?"

I think it was my knowing assertion that hit him. His eyes misted just a fraction until he hardened them desperately. Tough boy.

"Yeah, actually, it was a bitch of a day."

I stopped the urge to chastise his language and dealt instead with the pain of the message.

"What happened?"

He looked at me suspiciously, aware we were on new and unfamiliar territory for his age. *He used to talk so freely when he was a little boy. But he was bigger now – a lot bigger.*

"Um – nothing, it's like just a girl."

I thought to myself that it's never *just* anything.

"Do you want to tell me more, son?"

He turned his head away a little: "Um, not right now."

No matter, I thought, it's a start. I didn't need to pressurize him for anything more.

He seemed to sense this and looked down at me directly, seemingly perplexed. "Mother, what *are* you on?"

I looked him in the eyes. "Nothing – and I swear I haven't touched that stash hidden under your bed either."

He looked shocked. "Er – er, I'm just keeping that for a friend, like..."

I waved his words away. My bum was sore and so I stood up. I still looked up at him, even with my high heels on.

"It doesn't matter, Michael, as long as you have a handle on it."

He relaxed visibly, suddenly staring hard at my face, noticing things. "Are you okay, Mum? It looks like you've been..."

"I'm okay," I said.

I could almost hear him think: "Tough old bat."

I knew I should actually model more self-disclosure. But in this case, I didn't know what the hell to say.

"Oh." He closed the topic with a relieved and disbelieving shake of his head, but picked up quickly on my earlier statement: "Yeah, I guess a little weed doesn't matter. It's obviously not as bad as scratching wooden floors."

I looked at him. He looked at me, slightly scared, as if he was afraid he'd overstepped the mark.

*God, what an idiot I've been.* But then I smiled.

I stepped past him into the hallway.

He turned to watch me. His bag was lying crumpled against the firmly-shut study door, where Jack no doubt lurked, with his reading and computer stuff.

I dragged the spiky heel of my shoe in a scratch along a pristine, polished maple board.

Mike looked down in horrified disbelief at the floor. We could both see a six-inch gouge in the woodwork.

"I should have done that a while ago," I said.

He looked up at my face, agog, with rising laughter: "Jesus, Mom, you're barking mad, you know that!"

"Woof! Woof! What do you expect?" I said, "After all, I'm a..."

I left it unsaid. I couldn't actually say it, because I was laughing.

And so was Mike. Big belly guffaws. I'd forgotten how infectious his laugh could be. It was only a matter of time before we both needed to find a chair to sit on, down in the lounge, to ease the bellyache of laughing so wildly.

Even Jack came down to see what it was all about.

*It's a long time since we were all in the lounge together.*

And it was then that I remembered what happens to toilet waste.

I was thirsty and hot from laughing so much, but I realized there was nothing I wanted from the fridge. Still, it felt as if it was probably too early to have a drink of water from the tap. I doubted they'd recycled our toilet waste yet, even though we fed into one of London's largest and most efficient sewerage recycling reservoirs.

I wondered how London would react to a homeopathic dose of God.

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**Nick Wood** is a writer new to our pages. Originally from South Africa, he has lived in London for a number of years now and works as a clinical psychologist. His stories have appeared in *Scheherazade* and other small-press magazines.

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# interzone

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# Dawn in the Garden of England

*Gary Budgen*

In his castle Edwin Mourne, the Dryhten of Kent, stood at the mirror admiring himself in his underwear. Behind him his butler Rigby held two jackets, one a long-tailed black affair the other a dress tunic with epaulettes ingeniously fashioned in the sun rune of the New Dawn. Without turning the Dryhten drew in a breath before intoning, *"Ich the vader of oure Cantware, y-wyte hou it y-event thet this is seide mid Engliss of Kent."*

"Well?" said the Dryhten when Rigby still hadn't responded.

"Sir?"

"Boffins at Canterbury. It's in Kentish. They say that soon we'll be able to issue interfaces to a language-acquisition application. Within half a generation we'll be speaking the genuine ancestral tongue – as it was before being diluted by Norman French. What do you think?"

"I think the tunic, sir. It carries more of an air of authority."

"Must you insist on playing Jeeves?"

"More of a Lear's fool, sir."

"I don't know why I tolerate you, Rigby. Perhaps because I must tolerate someone. If I disposed of everyone who displeased me I would be little more than a monster."

"As you will, sir. Have you decided on your apparel for this evening?"

"Leave them both. I'll choose soon enough. You can go

now."

When he was alone the Dryhten sat at his desk. Beside the antique fountain pen and sheaf of writing paper was the palimpsest of reports he had already gone over with Rigby. The forestation was proceeding apace and the relocation of the non-Kentish population to the slums of south-east London would soon be complete. All was in place for the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the New Dawn. There was just one check he wanted to make and he had to be on his own for that. Even Rigby knew nothing about Project Bestiary.

He rolled up his sleeve and from the drawers of the desk pulled out an interface, a green blob that began to melt into a gel as soon as he had poured it onto his skin. He could still feel himself in the seat in his dressing room, the weight of his body in the old chair. He was even able to fade-in his vision so that he came back entirely. Now, though, he let himself be totally immersed into the viewpoint of Crawley, the Project Thane, who stood on the edge of a forest clearing. Crawley gave him another tedious explanation of the conversion process from the raw material to the final outcome. But the Dryhten cut him off. Apart from being slightly squeamish he wasn't interested in the details. Leave that to the likes of Crawley. The Dryhten liked instead to contemplate the final seasoning he was adding to the spell he had been so long brewing.

Crawley proceeded across the camp to have a look at the pen. The Dryhten appreciated the setting of the camp. The clearing was cut in the dense heart of the forest. Trees had sprung up all over the county in the last two decades but here was a real oak, not a quick-grow spliced with leylandii. It could have been 500 years old and he had insisted that it be preserved *in situ*. It stood on the edge of a small knoll where it brooded like some cantankerous ancestral spirit.

And beside it was the pen, where the subjects could be observed. He felt his own anticipation, how back in the castle room his fingers were gripped tightly on the arm of the chair. Very probably he was sweating. Slowly he would inspect each of the cells in turn. He already knew that all was well, but he wanted to linger, hovering on the edge of his achievement.

The North Downs were now forested so densely the road was almost dark. Ferns and undergrowth encroached and higher branches blocked sunlight so that Harper only saw the woman as he almost ran her down. He stopped the half-track, stuck his arm out of the cab and signalled for the convoy to halt.

Without speaking he motioned her up to join him in the cab. When she didn't move he lent out and had a look at her; she was carrying a small backpack and was dressed for hiking in boots and cords. She hunched as though trying to diminish the effect of her impressive height. She had long blonde hair tinged with silver. She looked to be in her mid-30s.

"If you're hitchhiking," said Harper, "you're not very good at it."

She shrugged and smiled up at him without raising her eyes so that still he had not seen them.

"You should stick your thumb out," he said, "and nobody uses this road anyway."

She looked up and he caught the sting of the sea-blue gaze she gave him, then she looked ahead, taking in his own half-track, Rahul's Routemaster bus, the VW van and the Wolsey. "You use it."

"Oh well, we are nobodies," he laughed as she took his hand in a trapeze grip and he pulled her up to the cab.

"Then there won't be any complicated involvements, will there?" Once again she let her eyes play across his face so that Harper, who wasn't easily embarrassed, blushed.

"My name's Harper," he blurted.

"Nice name."

"You have one?"

"Yes, I do."

He gave the signal for the others to follow. "Look," he said putting the half-track into gear, "this is not the place to be arsey with folk. You're in Kent now. They don't like snappy answers."

"Kent," she said, and lingered on the name, looking out of the window as the thick mass of beech and oak began to roll past them. "Yes, I've heard you can't be too sure of people round here."

"That's right."

"Then why'd you pick me up?"

"Oh," Harper said, flashing her his best devilish grin, "I can tell a rascal from their shadow."

"Well," she said and put her hand on his leg for a moment before brushing back hair from her eyes, "I'll take that as a compliment, Harper. My name's Mallory, Laura Mallory."

"Hello, Laura Mallory. And what brings you to Kent?"

"Oh, I'm just looking. What's your excuse?"

"Can't you tell? A half-track, an old London bus and a fine assortment of antique vehicles and strange folks with them? We're bringing the fair, juggling and hoopla with a bit of divination on the side."

"And what about tonight?" She put her head right out of the cab window to look above her, through the forest canopy. "It'll be dark soon."

"We'll pull to the roadside. Then you can have a bit of fairground folk hospitality." And Harper grabbed her hand, the hand that had touched him, and squeezed it. He was used to making a play for women but there was something about this one. Laura continued to look out of the window, staring into the boughs and branches that criss-crossed like scribbles obliterating a page. When she finally deigned to notice his touch she merely lifted his hand gently back onto his own leg.

"We'll see," she said.

That night they sat around the campfire and listened whilst Rahul played "Paper Moon" on the guitar. There were too many names for Laura to remember: Jane, a dark-haired woman with a gaggle of kids; various teenagers juggling and a thin old man cossetting the spitted rabbit on the fire.

Harper decided he would impress Laura with his cartomancy. As she licked grease from her fingers he sidled up to her, cleared the ground of twigs and stones, and began to lay out his deck.

Laura watched with a raised eyebrow, the flames of the fire playing in her eyes and on her hair. "So you're a fortune teller, Harper?"

"I have that gift."

"A gift, is it? Don't tell me I'm to meet a handsome stranger."

"That's already happened." That line worked and she laughed and took the can of beer offered her. As she drank Harper put his fingertips onto the first of the cards. He felt the adhesion there, the gel creeping into the pores of his skin allowing him to connect with the higher reality, an inner space navigated by will alone. "This card," he said, "is called *The Array* or *Infinity's Hall*. It shows a room and on the wall of that room is a picture of a room, and on the wall of that room is a picture of a room..." He trailed off as the card pulled him in. It wasn't one that usually came up and he wondered now if he had ever truly understood it. *The Array* signified the higher realities that the cards themselves made available. How complex they were. You could enter the room with the picture, then enter the room in the picture that it, in turn, contained. Ahead were endless rooms stretching off in a series that made him dizzy. How casually we treat the infinite, he thought.

Vertigo overcame him as he imagined falling into an endless regression he could never escape from. The world became a series of trapdoors that opened into labyrinths of indecipherable symbols. With sudden insight he realized that Laura had emerged from this labyrinth.

"Harper," Laura said. He felt her hand on his arm. "Are you all right?" She laughed nervously and tried to make a joke: "Come back to me, come back to me."

Harper looked up from the cards. He wasn't in the mood for flirting, not now. "What does *The Array* mean to you?"

She shrugged. "None of this is real." Her eyes took in the trees, their encampment and finally the cards he had laid out.

"What do you mean?"

"These forests. They've only been here about 20 years. Mourne planted them as part of his great New Dawn. When I was a girl Kent was all fields; not strips like they have round the villages now but open land, stretching as far as you could see. But that was the result of man-made change too. Even if it took a little longer. Now your cards..."

"My cards?"

"They have an interface to a virtuality, yes?"

"The higher reality."

"That's just it, Harper. It isn't. We treat so many things as though they're natural when they're not. The virtuality is like the forest: it was made by people."

Harper reached over and she let him take the can of beer from her. He had a long gulp and looked at his spread again. "The other main cards are *The Portal* and *The Feast*. *The Portal* shows a figure in silhouette attached to an old-fashioned oracle."

"It's a virtual-reality headset."

"So it has some significance for you?"

"I used to use one. A long time ago. They're obsolete now. As your cards demonstrate, nobody needs to wear a bowl on their head."

"You see, there is something in the cards," but Harper knew that he was just playing the game now, performing a bit of showmanship because he didn't want to delve any deeper. In fact he wanted to pack the cards away, drink a lot more and sleep the whole night off.

"Well, what about the last one?" Laura asked.

They both looked down at *The Feast*. It showed a medieval lord at his table, eating his fill with his courtiers. His wife stood at the side of the hall looking on with a bored expression. Meanwhile beneath the table huge maggots devoured a corpse. "It's not very nice, is it, Harper?"

"No," he said and he gulped in a breath, relieved that she didn't seem to be taking it at all seriously.

"I hope it doesn't mean that there are lots of creepy-crawlies round here." But it wasn't that she was taking it as a joke; rather, she had realized something had disturbed him and was playing the child to put him at ease.

She grabbed the beer back and downed it as Rahul sang the final chorus of his song. "It's only a paper moon, hanging over a cardboard sea, but it wouldn't be make-believe if you believed in me."

Over the next week they played the villages of the Downs, delighting folk who seemed to assume they were part of the Dryhten's 20th-anniversary celebrations. Harper, Laura and the others had all seen plenty of propaganda pieces about the new rural utopia but the people here did seem happy, if a little wary and out of touch.

Rahul would get the villagers hunting the queen or playing shell games; his punters marvelled at him since most had never seen anyone with dark skin. Jane ate fire, the teenagers juggled and performed acrobatics. Big Rondo the strong-woman held small children aloft in her giant hands. And Harper, of course, told fortunes.

They only ever stayed in one place for a day and were gone by twilight, on to the next small settlement and out of the way of any authorities that might get wind of them.

A few days before the main anniversary ball, Dryhten Mourne received a group of young intellectuals who had come to Kent in their enthusiasm for the New Dawn. The culmination of the evening was the performance of the skaldic storyteller. He stood before the fire and declaimed in alliterative verse the myths of the ancient Jutes. He spoke of the wars of gods and men and of those creatures that were neither: thusser, nisse, lund folk, ras, skogs and nok. To most of the audience these were words that, even in the recesses of their imagination, could find no shapes to fix upon.

As the convoy pulled out of the dell of Detling, Laura sat beside Harper in the cab and stared out of the window as the forest enveloped them, cradling its branches over the dirt road.

"It's bigger than I thought," she said and as she turned to look at him he noticed her drained expression.

"What's the matter?"

"We've been travelling around for nearly two weeks now. I just thought I might have recognized something."

"You've been here before?"

"It's not that." She sighed and then, from her backpack, pulled out a notebook that had an old-fashioned screen readout. "Listen."

She started it up and played a recording. It was a young voice, a boy on the cusp of manhood, full of life:

"I am here at last, with other boys my age, all of us filled with enthusiasm for the future we are helping to build.

"There's this brilliant old oak tree on a little hill, bark as rough as the skin of someone who's aged without any treatment. At night when I'm in my tent I can sometimes see its silhouette against the sky like a horror from one of those fairy stories you used to read me.

"Still, we'll have the dormitories built soon and they'll let us use them while we finish our work here – christen them for whoever's coming after us."

Laura's face was pallid with overworked misery. "There were others before that," she said, "with visuals, from the barracks in Canterbury where he was stationed. But



once he got out, out to wherever it is, there was only sound. The last one I got was this." She pulled out a piece of paper, ragged where it had been handled so many times.

She read "...I am writing this by hand! I didn't think they still carried these sorts of letters but you can piggy-back them on the parcel service. They don't want any communication with the outside world but the word is that this project is very important. Close to the Dryhten's heart. It feels so great to be part of something glorious, something so much bigger than myself. At last I feel that I am contributing to the building of the better world that the Dryhten is creating..."

Harper felt her gaze as he tried to concentrate on the road. He knew she was suffering but still felt a pang of jealousy for this missing lover. Laura had hooked up with them to find him, that was all, not because she liked Harper. Yet she was now part of the fair, for whatever reason, and he knew that he could do nothing but help her.

They said little as the convoy pulled off the road into the outer boughs of the forest and the fire was lit. She sat beside him and at last he turned and asked her: "So, this soldier, he was your fellow?"

"He was the same age as you, Harper."

"What does that mean?"

"Look at me."

"I've looked at you plenty."

"Notice how my hair's got even greyer this last week, how the skin around my neck has sagged."

He hadn't noticed that. Just the sea blue of her eyes, just her laugh and the way her most mundane movements turned into a dance that only he could see. He reached over and took a thick strand of her hair, held it as though its appearance here was as miraculous as that of a fragment of coral.

"It's grey," she said.

"Silver," he said, "beautiful."

"I'm nearly 80, Harper. I was a High Programmer in the Polity. Maintaining the virtuality."

He tried not to gasp. The opulence of the High Programmers was proverbial; they were creatures from a world he could hardly imagine, able to afford the best food and housing, the most effective treatments...

"I had a juve job 40 years ago. When I was still young enough to be vain. I could have had it renewed if I'd stayed. The hair is always the first to go. Then the skin. I might be covered in wrinkles soon."

He released her hair and looked into her eyes. "Don't be so hard on yourself, lots of people use juve. Well, those that can afford it."

"So young and yet so charming," and she laid a finger on his lips in a proxy kiss. "He's called Robert and he's my grandson. Run off to join the Geoguth, the New Dawn youth-wing. I've not heard from him for a year. I even cracked the military records but there was no trace of him."

"We'll find him," Harper said, injecting as much purpose into his voice as he could. He stood up and looked around as though he was going to start searching immediately.

Laura dragged him back.

They drank beer and some wine that the locals had given them until the fire burnt low. As the others bedded down they walked together into the forest to where they could hear the sound of a brook hop-skipping over stones. When his skin touched hers she felt ripe and fresh. They rolled on the earth, in twigs and pebbles and the soft leaf-fall from the autumn of a year before.

The next day they found the body. Just before they were due to strike camp Harper followed Laura as she went off to fetch water. He knew it was foolish to try and recapture a moment but when he thought of the night before he could not resist the attempt. What lover can?

He pictured her stooped beside the brook, hair dangling just above the surface of the water, her reflection cast by the sun between the islets of froth. But she hadn't got that far and in his hurry he almost ran into her.

"What is it?" he blurted.

Laura started. "You made me jump. It's... look."

She stood beside him, her hand finding his. The corpse was small, like that of an adolescent who hadn't quite finished his final growth spurt, and was dressed in a dirty loincloth. The skin was a smudged blend of green and brown with a texture like that of a frog. From its side blood had caked and dried from a wound that must have slowly drained its life away. Then Harper noticed the head and pointed.

"I know," said Laura without focusing because she had examined it at close range, had seen the pointed ears that were too large and the stunted nose that looked like a gnarled root. "But look at its back."

Harper turned to her. He didn't want to inspect the creature any further. He just wanted to be away from here. "What?"

"Go on."

He stepped closer trying not to glance at the body and understood why Laura had insisted. "It's beautiful." On the ground was what looked like a cloak of shattered glass stained with iridescent reflections from the broken rays filtering through the forest canopy. Little shards lay scattered about on the cushion of the forest floor like fragments of crystal. He noticed how a delicate frame tracery, like leaf veins, had held each tiny pane.

"If they were wings," said Laura, "I don't think it could have flown very far on them."

It hadn't occurred to Harper to fathom what he was looking at, he was simply drawn in by the play of light and colour. He took a step back inspecting the dead creature again whilst keeping a view of the broken wings behind it. Another step back and he was with Laura, looking at a dirty corpse that he did not understand. "What is it?" he said again.

"I don't know what to call it. There are no names here. If there was a name to describe this I'm sure it's in a language that's long dead. Or else it would be the coinage of some fantasist who'd never stumbled across the real thing rotting in a forest."

"Maybe," ventured Harper, "maybe it's like what you hear they used to have. In the fairs. Rondo tells tales

about her grandfather's days, how they had a bloke with webbed feet. You know, a freak that could pull the crowds."

"I don't think this creature ran away from the fair. Do you? And one other thing..." She bent down and lifted something from around its neck.

"What?"

"Dog tags," she said. "It's wearing army dog tags."

On the morning of the anniversary ball the guests began arriving early, filling the great hall, making small talk in anticipation of the Dryhten's entrance. He would call Rigby to dress him soon but he just had one more secret to savour.

Project Bestiary had been progressing so well that he commenced his inspection of it expecting nothing but good news.

As Harper and Laura emerged from the forest the other members of the convoy were being herded into the back of a lorry by a group of soldiers. They were spotted before they had time to turn and run.

An enormous figure with huscarl's stripes waddled over to them, flanked by a younger soldier. "You two. Where have you been?"

"In the woods," said Harper.

"See anything?"

Harper knew that neither he nor Laura had seen anything. He shook his head.

"What you been doing?" barked the huscarl whilst a prurient grin emerged onto the young soldier's face.

"I think *he's* got the idea." Harper pointed with his head as the soldier looked on the brink of giggling.

"Oh, does he?" said the huscarl who now turned his attention fully on his charge and was on the brink of berating him when, from behind the lorry, an officer appeared. It was a thane wearing a beret emblazoned with a wolf badge. The huscarl immediately gave him his full attention with a "Sir."

"These two seen anything, Huscarl Harris?"

"No, sir."

"Well, load them up then."

The huscarl gave the order to the young soldier and walked off with the officer. As he did so Harper heard him ask: "So you think we can keep it under wraps then, sir?"

"Afraid not, Harris. It just came over the communicator... the boss just went and paid a bloody visit, didn't he? Spoke to him personally. Never thought he know so many obscenities."

Before Harper could even try to exchange glances with Laura, the soldier pointed his machine pistol at them both; his grey-green eyes blinking nervously beneath his forage cap. "Come on, come on," he shouted.

"You can't do this," said Harper.

"Just fucking move," he swept his weapon forward as though he could brush them along with it.

"Let's just do as he says," said Laura.

"What about our vehicles?" Harper asked as they reached the back of the lorry. The huscarl reappeared

and poked Harper between his shoulder blades then grabbed the back of his neck and showed him the convoy. "We'll take care of that, lad."

Harper saw soldiers moving down the length of the convoy splashing fuel from a jerrycan.

The Dryhten was determined that the ball should go ahead as planned. After screaming at the half-wit thane he took a calm-pill and tried to assess the extent of the crisis. The break out had only been discovered when the regular patrol had checked in after a full day out in the forests. By then the guards at the camp were all dead and the project staff themselves had been, not only murdered, but mutilated to such a degree that even the veteran thane had sounded disturbed. "They'd taken their time over them," he'd said, "done things to the features, as though they were trying to alter them."

All that could be done was to carry on searching and making sure that any civilians found in the vicinity were rounded up and debriefed. There could be no danger here in the castle. It was very unlikely that the escapees had retained much of their previous knowledge.

When the calm-pill had worked its magic he called for Rigby and began to dress for his grand entrance.

They had been in the lorry most of the day whilst it patrolled, stopped, went on. It was already growing dark when they arrived at the castle. As they came across the drawbridge Laura saw a marquee surrounded by burning torches. People in elaborate costumes were milling around, drinks in their hands, laughing and joking. For a moment she caught a few bars of music. Then the lorry stopped and they were ushered out into a small dark courtyard, and the whole scene had no more reality than a fleck of memory.

The courtyard was shuttered with a wooden gate and Laura heard it bolted. Soon she could smell the cigarette smoke of the guard duty on the other side. Slowly her eyes adjusted to the pale glare that washed over from some outside light source.

"I don't like this," said Harper.

Laura said nothing. She was trying to think, to fit all she had seen into a pattern.

"They're nervous about something," said Rondo, nodding her head over to the gate and beyond.

"Yes," said Harper, "too bloody right they are."

"Shush." Laura touched Harper's arm. "Give me a card."

"Why?"

"I want to find out what's going on."

"But I didn't think you believed in it." Perplexed, Harper pulled out his deck and dealt one off the top, not looking, not wanting to register any significance.

Laura held it in her palm, inspecting it. "What is this one called?"

She held it close to his face. A young girl in blue with a headband tied around her fair hair stares into an ornate mirror. Instead of her reflection a death's head grins back.

"It's called *The Looking Glass*," said Harper.

"Well, it'll do." She began to rub her thumb across the surface of the card feeling the adhesion of the interface. Then she was in. She confronted an image and knew that it was how she saw herself. The skin beneath her eyes caught shadows and her cheeks were lined with furrows. Was she looking that old already, that worn out? The card wanted to pull her into its dance of meaning, dangle mystic portents before her. She must try to see the underlying structures.

"You all right?" Harper asked.

She nodded, trying not to be distracted. Red Riding Hood, Robin Hood, Robin Goodfellow, Goody Twoshoes. She admired Harper for his skill in interpretation. He managed to extract meaning from what was, to her, an overload of free-floating signifiers. Concentrating, she isolated one image, a stick figure in black and white, focused on the area that held it and saw the cell of a data structure. It was an old database that seemed to be isolated, accessed only through Harper's cards. "Harper, do you ever do general prophecies?"

"How do you mean?"

"Wars, disasters. Sad stories about the death of kings?"

"Well, I *can* do..."

That was enough. Even this obscure little corner of the virtuality must have a connection. She looked around and found the death's head again, willed herself towards it. Where there was death there would be plague, war... yes. News.

From a general news-server a simple search led her through a sun-rune gateway to Kent. Government statistics. Ruralization and resettlement. Triumph of New Dawn. Applications for various documents. This was public stuff but she quickly cracked though and found herself in the intravert, the closed system of Dryhten Mourne's regime.

She had been here before; had set out to look for her grandson Robert and fingered her way through military records finding no trace of him. She'd masqueraded as a medical sub-routine that checked inoculations and she tried this again, navigating through the records of every soldier making sure they'd had their jabs. Soon she found what she was looking for. Records for soldiers. All had serial numbers. Serial numbers that would appear on dog tags. But none of these soldiers had names.

Dryhten Mourne, dressed as Woden, surveyed the collection of visiting dignitaries, officials and admirers that had all come to his anniversary ball to pay their respects. He should have been full of self-satisfaction but he could hardly concentrate and found himself continually glancing off to the perimeter of the castle grounds to where the forest began. A large detachment of soldiers had been posted there all evening and, when last Rigby had reported back, all was well. His butler had been confused with the Dryhten's anxiety but that hadn't stopped Mourne sending him away again to fix up a makeshift sight connection with the thane commanding the soldiers in the forest. He had to know that all was well.

Rigby returned and discreetly handed him an interface which he let dissolve in his hand. Soon, over his imme-

diate vision, he could see from the viewpoint of the thane. All was still and the men were arranged with their guns ready and with night-goggles that would flare at the slightest hint of life.

No matter how well camouflaged the portal to Project Bestiary was it couldn't keep out a determined woman with the skills of a High Programmer. She waded through a mélange of mythological images cross-referenced with gene and morphological research. Then the details.

When she had seen all she had to, Laura disengaged and found herself back in the courtyard, gripping hard on Harper's arm and breathing in painful gasps. The card that was called *The Looking Glass* had fallen onto the cobblestones at her feet.

"What's wrong?" Harper asked.

"They were listed as raw material," she said.

"Who?"

"There were soldiers," she shook her head, "and they were listed as raw material. Don't you see? That thing in the forest, it had dog tags."

"I don't understand."

"I have to get out."

"What?"

"Please. You've got to help." She found herself pushing against the gate.

"How? The guards..."

"Please, Harper. I think Robert is out there..."

Harper thought. "OK. We'll all go. At least you have a chance then. Rahul, Rondo, everyone! We're going over."

Once he had the constant assurance of a view of the forest the Dryhten began to relax again. Tomorrow he would have to make a measured assessment of Project Bestiary and work out what could be salvaged. It had been going so well until these recent developments.

As the band began to strike up again, the Dryhten allowed his attention to focus on the forest. All was still.

It was now time to make his speech: accompanied by music, it would reinforce his vision of Kent. The music was rather plodding, too ponderous for his taste but the experts had insisted that it was authentic. In the distance he heard odd fumbings, birds and small mammals, soldiers fidgeting in their positions. There was an undercurrent, becoming louder. He checked the connection to the thane then remembered that it was only visual. He was hearing the sounds unmediated and they were louder now, infiltrating the stepped beat of the musicians. A scuttling, a squawk. Repeated. The guests were turning, searching for the source of the clamour. As the band stuttered to a halt there was a sudden and short burst of gunfire. He checked the thane's view and found him struggling through the forest in panic his night-goggles burnt with the blurs of rapid movement in infrared.

The guests were running towards the road leading to the drawbridge. The Dryhten was soon alone. He hardly noticed the chaos around him as he was concentrating on seeing what the thane saw. But the thane hardly registered the face of the creature that bought him down and rendered the connection useless.



The Dryhten stood in the deserted marquee. Slowly he took off Woden's great cloak and helmet; both now felt too heavy to bear.

"There seems to have been some sort of disturbance, sir," said Rigby, appearing from somewhere. "We should get inside." The Dryhten nodded.

As they trotted back he tried not to listen for the scurrying footsteps that he knew would soon be following. Even if they made it to the castle they would not be safe. Only the Dryhten knew the full extent of Project Bestiary, how his scientists had begun to bring the old stories to life creating a stage fit for heroes to stride upon. It was true that they had had to use some raw material and that had been rather unpleasant. But no one had suspected that the subjects would retain much information, that they might understand what they once had been and come in pursuit of those who had transformed them.

Laura ran towards the sounds, leaving the others to handle the guards, ignoring the flight of the costumed crowd from the marquee. She had wanted to escape into the forest to find other creatures like the one she and Harper had found; discover what they might know from the time before, when they had been enthusiastic young volunteers – before they'd been snared in the twilight imaginings of their leader.

There was a burst of gunfire but this died abruptly. Then she saw them as they left the forest and came out of the night into the glow of the torches. Patchwork crea-

tures thrown together from the order of all living things, some with insect wings, others cloven and fanged. They carried improvised weapons: branches of trees, a broken fence post. Some wore battered soldiers' helmets and had rifles that they wielded as clubs. Out of their faces, textured like bruised fruit or tree bark, their eyes shone with the glee of the prey finally turning on their hunters. But what disturbed her most was that, even in a mob, there was still something human about each of them. A creature with an enlarged head that looked like a child giant stumbled on swollen feet and dragged the remains of a soldier behind it. A delicate, elongated figure crawled forward on stilt limbs like a crane fly. Laura held out her hands in entreaty as they came forward, searching their faces for a remnant that might be familiar.

Harper crossed the drawbridge just in time to see the horde trample Laura beneath their hooves and talons. He started forward until caught in Rondo's arms and dragged into the shelter of the forest. They watched as the creatures entered the castle. Harper would only leave when he heard the first screams of slaughter from within. Then they turned and ran, hoping the dawn would find them far away.

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**Gary Budgen** is a new writer who lives in London. The above is his first published story.

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# Heavy Ice

*Dominic Green*

“**L**ook, I keep telling you, I am merely a gentleman on vacation.”

“Oh, sure. And I’m just wearing this monkey suit because I’m kinky for uniforms.”

“Really? I think I have a nurse’s uniform in your size – no, don’t hit me, I have rights – ”

“Mr Dahlgren,” the cop said. “It may have escaped you when you formulated your alibi in the back of the conveyor on the way in here, but this isn’t the most popular of holiday locations.”

Dahlgren looked around him at the grey metal walls, floor and ceiling. “I must say, my travel agent lied to me shamelessly. Bet this place rings like a gong when the starquake hits, eh?”

The cop – a young blood bucking for promotion, no doubt, who still thought the way to approach a problem was to run up and shout at it until it died of ear-ache – paced angrily round the room, when Dahlgren knew he would rather be hitting Dahlgren. “No,” the young blood admitted miserably. “It’s soundproofed.”

“You can move me to a more unpleasant cell if you like,” said Dahlgren sympathetically.

“What is this achieving? Tell me that,” said the youngster, half to himself, half probably to an imagined jury, as he paced. “You’re a professional jewel thief – ”

“Professional *diamond* thief. I only steal diamonds.”

“Diamond thief, then – ”

“– And let’s get one thing straight right at the beginning. Iridiamonds are *not* diamonds. They are a temporary fad, a pale shadow of the Real Shebang. They do not have a diamond’s clarity, its fire in a brilliant cut. Yes, they are a hundred times as valuable as diamonds are today, due to the high costs of digging them out of this benighted rock. But tomorrow they’ll be paste, worthless,

like yesterday’s movie stars.”

The cop looked Dahlgren in the eye. “I know one thing. They’ll be a million times as valuable in a year’s time.”

This actually did dislodge Dahlgren. Only slightly – the little man was as deceptively hard as the diminutive gems he dealt in. But it was enough. Lieutenant Sforza allowed himself a tiny internal yelp of “*victory!*”

“What?”

“You heard. That’s what the latest estimates gave us on today’s newscast. One year at the most. Then I’ll get shot of this plum assignment and get a grip of the shitty end of the stick again – Southern California, maybe, or Florida. Or maybe Hawaii...”

“Hang on, hang on.” The old guy actually seemed interested, as if he hadn’t heard it before. “Silmaril is going to shut down production in a year’s time?”

“Silmaril is going to *cease to exist* in a year’s time.”

“But I thought its orbit was stable, even though it was going round Nemesis – ” The old geezer looked round himself as if he were genuinely frightened.

“Perfectly stable. It’s not Silmaril’s orbit that’s important. It’s its composition.” The Lieutenant paced up and down the interrogation cell. As he paced, a starquake rumbled into his boots through the floor.

No, he corrected himself. *The quake is in me, the floor, and my boots, simultaneously.*

“If you’ve been visiting this system as a tourist, you’ll know the circumstances of Silmaril’s formation. The Silmaril system revolves around the central black hole, Nemesis, which was discovered after analysis of the perturbation of the orbits of comets in Sol’s Oort Cloud...”

“... and which was responsible for the destruction of the dinosaurs, the ammonites, those odd mammal-like reptile beasts that died out at the end of the Permian

period, and whatever things were creeping around at the beginning of the Cambrian,” continued Dahlgren. “Yes. Yes, I dimly remember all this from the in-flight entertainment. Of course, as a retired gentleman on vacation all this talk of orbits and perihelia is something of a mystery to me.”

The Lieutenant nodded. “Well, Nemesis swings round the Sun in an orbit half a light-year long, and it’s a miracle it hasn’t been snatched off Sol yet by a passing star. When it comes right up close to Sol, it dislodges a hail of comets sunwards, thus causing the periodic extinctions that may have allowed evolution to continually diversify on Earth and eventually produce allegedly intelligent life. But the Silmaril system didn’t always have just one primary – ”

Dahlgren nodded. “Yes. The Hypothetical Star.” He took out the little black box he’d had when he’d been taken into custody, and turned it over absent-mindedly in his fingers. What lay inside it, Sforza had no idea. No orders had yet been given to search the little guy.

“Indeed,” said Sforza. “Some thousand million years ago, back when life on Earth had still not got past the primordial soup course, the Hypothetical Star, a relatively modest Sol-type star of perhaps one-point-five solar masses, sat where Nemesis is now. Then, a secondary object – a neutron star of approximately three times Sol’s mass – entered the system, disrupted its orbits – it’s thought from their geological composition that Pluto and Chiron originated in the Nemesis system and were nabbed by Sol at this time – and ended by colliding with the Hypothetical Star itself. The added matter pushed the combined mass of the two stars over the upper limit of neutron star size, and produced Nemesis, a black hole of three solar masses. Now, when a neutron star, which is big but relatively lightweight, gets swallowed by a collapsar, most of its mass goes gurgle-gurgle straight down the Event Horizon, but *some* of it – piffling quantities, you know, about a few times the mass of Jupiter – breaks off from the main mass, shoots round the collapsar on a slingshot orbit, accelerated to a pretty fair chunk of the speed of light – ”

“– and Silmaril gets it in the face.” Dahlgren opened the box, peeked inside, and shut it with finality.

“Precisely. Neutronium vapour, or collapsium dust, travelling very fast, passing through the Silmarillian planetary crust like bullets through air. Sure, it’s a fine powder, so it slows down pretty quickly, but by the time the cloud of pulsar effluvia has passed, the entire planetary structure of Silmaril is peppered with the stuff – ”

“– which produces Iridiamonds.”

“Naturally.” The Lieutenant turned and let the gravity sit him down on a chair. “Diamond is one of the few substances whose crystal lattice is strong enough to hold neutronium motes without either being crushed up by the neutronium’s gravitational field or having the neutronium shoot through it as if it wasn’t there. And that tiny gravitational field of a neutronium mote is strong enough to bend light, which means that iridium crystals shine like a fistful of rainbows. Which is why *you*, my friend, are so eager to get your kid-gloved mitts on them.”

“Ah, now there, my friend, our two tour guides seem to disagree.” Dahlgren looked puzzled, like a small child cheated of his bedtime story. “You were getting to why this entire world was going to be destroyed, I believe.”

“Where’d you think all the extra neutronium went, the stuff that didn’t lodge in diamond seams? Granted, 99 percent of it shot straight through the planet and out the other side, but the extra one percent – the one percent that gives this world a gravity well to rival Venus’s, though it isn’t much bigger than Mars – sank like a lead-weighted stone to the middle of Silmaril.”

He grinned at the smaller man.

“Something to think about while you’re sleeping on top of it in a locked cell,” he said.

Lieutenant Sforza stared up through thick lead glass at absolutely nothing. Sometimes Nemesis winked at you when you watched her, when another billion tonnes of flying rock impacted on her fine-polished surface and sent out a last incredibly bright, brief cry for help. But today she wasn’t winking.

“He didn’t do it, you know.” He looked through the one-way glass at the prisoner. The prisoner winked back at him. Dahlgren had a disconcerting tendency to be able to do that accurately, every time. “How does he *do* that?”

Evelyn Hurtado took a long draw on one of the gigantic smart cigars that filled the air around her with an odoriferous cloud like the repelling ink of a squid. “His eyes polarize light more effectively than the human average. It’s a genetic peculiarity shared by around point oh-one percent of the population, I believe. Makes him a well-nigh-perfect appraiser of diamonds. De Beers paid quite highly for his services, before he went bad; he was the only man who was able to tell Lermontov Process stones from natural ones, towards the end. It’s also why I’m sitting down here in the corner where he can’t see me. I want to be a surprise.”

Sforza looked back at the prisoner. “He didn’t do it, you know,” he repeated. “His record shows no record of any violent tendencies. And Villanova was killed quite deliberately, shot through the back of the head.”

Evelyn Hurtado held up an admonishing hand. “Easy, Raffaele. I know he didn’t do it. Dahlgren and I go back a long way. When I first met him, he was caught by a security guard, trying to snatch a piece of the Gutté-de-Sang – the largest blood-red diamond in the world, by the way – from the Gates Collection in downtown Seattle. The guard was an old guy who’d only been employed for his service record – he admitted in court that he’d had difficulty getting his gun out of his holster when he’d surprised Dahlgren ultrasounding the safe. Dahlgren was holding a lasercutter at the time, and was only two yards from the old guy” – she stopped and appeared to reminisce wistfully – “and in those days, he was in great physical shape. Dahlgren put the cutters down and put his mitts up. Professional pride. He’s like the Holy Spirit – he likes to get in and out before anyone knows he’s been.”

“That’s why he’s called the Spirit.”

“Precisely. Anyway, the old bugger shot him. That’s why he walks with a limp. And he got two years for the



privilege of being shot. But his wife waited for him. They must've been married 20 years now. So you see, I didn't think he would murder a guy by shooting him through the back of the head, just to get his hands on a chunk of fancy crystal that he wouldn't rate as a gem in any case." She stared at the CCTV monitor. "Wonder what that little black box he's got in his hand is?"

Sforza shrugged. "Respectfully, ma'am, we'd know that by now if you'd allowed us to search him according to standard procedure."

The landscape outside, and the window, shivered like a violin string as a starquake passed through the planet.

"Go on, say it," said Hurtado. "Say, 'What are you holding him for, then, ma'am?'"

"Uh, OK. What are you holding him for, then, ma'am?"

"Because he's a damn good cracksman, and he knows how and how not to pull a job of this kind. And the sort of hoods who have to pull a gun to get the goods irritate him. I want you to put him in with our four suspects. Put the pigeon in among the cats, and then interview him again afterwards and see whether he's had any ideas we wouldn't have come up with. He's a godsend – a perfect plant who'll be desperate to prove he's innocent by proving the others guilty. And of course, the only reason why he would be all the way out here is to commit a crime. The longer we keep him in here, the longer that crime remains uncommitted."

Sforza raised his eyebrows. "He said he'd retired."

Hurtado smiled. "He always does. I, on the other hand, am *serious* about retiring. I only shipped out here on a time-dilation flight to get to outlive my A-hole of a son. Once he's realized he'll never get his hands on the family home, maybe he'll stop playing cards and get a fucking job." She chuckled. "With any luck I'll get back home and inherit *his* millions."

She turned on her heel, taking care not to pass before the mirror, and walked out.

There was one window in the room, too heavy for two men to lift even if it could be eased out of the frame, and besides, what was beyond it was the best prison wall of all. Not hard vacuum, but methane and sulphur dioxide and other, less tangible horrors that either came out of the sky or out of the ground. All of this planet's indigenous atmosphere had been hosed off when it had stopped half a pulsar in its dayside.

"The Canterbury Company information guide said there might have been life on this world once," said the little old guy, making conversation, hands in pockets.

"It's not beyond the bounds of possibility," said the thin man sitting in the corner, leper-like, away from the cell's other occupants – the man who was big by way of being fat, the man who was big by way of being big, and the woman. "Silmaril has extensive diamond deposits – you might state with quite a degree of truthfulness that it is in fact paved with carborundum – which indicates that there were extensive organic deposits on the surface in the past. The diamond deposits are found in places which seem to indicate they were originally fossil-fuel deposits compressed by some tremendous shock in the planet's

past. Certainly, when the Hypothetical Star collapsed into Nemesis, all life, and all the fossil-fuel seams, on Silmaril would have been crushed by the shockwave."

"Poor planet," said the little old guy, winking at the mirror in the corner of the room for no apparent reason. "First it has all its atmosphere sucked off by a passing dead star, then its own live star dies on it."

"Yes. But I'm afraid Silmaril's problems aren't yet over," said the thin man with a friendly smile that said, See, Even Though I Know Infinitely More Than You, I Am Prepared to Crank Down My Magnificent Mind to Your Level. "Ungoliant is growing by the day."

"Ungoliant? What's that?"

"It's actually my own idea," said the thin man. "A big dark thing that eats Silmarils, when it can get them. It's my name for the neutron star that's growing inside this planet. You may have heard about it in *Canterbury Company News*, which you may also have noticed is the only news there is around here."

"Yes," said the little old fellow. "I have heard about it. You'll be Doctor Bell, I take it? If you don't mind me saying so, what's an eminent stellar-evolution physicist doing in a prison cell with the likes of me?"

Doctor Bell looked round the cell, still smiling his lecture-theatre smile. "Well, it would appear my reasons are the same as everyone else's. We were set up," he said – and then his eyes narrowed and he looked at his little cellmate with a student-late-for-lectures glare. "And don't think I don't know you were responsible for doing it."

"Pardon?"

The big man who sat on the bench by the door, filling most of it, said: "Come on, now, you don't know that's true. Sure, we know this guy is or was a professional criminal; but we don't know it was him who set us up."

"Set you up?" said the professional criminal. "How interesting. I seem to be in a cell where everyone really *does* say they've been set up. I presume none of the rest of you Did It either, yes?"

The big man flexed his hands, which, although it was warm in the cell, were covered with black gloves. "Don't get me wrong, sir; whoever *did* do it, I take my hat off to them." To the little criminal's disappointment, he didn't take off his hat and reveal what lay beneath it. "I hated Villanova enough to kill him, and if I hadn't been beaten to the draw I'd have shot him myself. But I *was* beaten, and I'm not taking the responsibility without having had the satisfaction of having done the deed."

"I hated him too," said the woman by the window, wistfully looking out at Nemesis's rings, ghostly as the halo of a decanonized saint in the light from annihilated gas and dust particles. The little man knew the rings weren't strictly rings, but rather an accretion disc; but for all their alteration from concentric circles to spirals as the eye moved from the outer rings to the inner, it was difficult to shake the feeling that the image floating in the window was friendly Saturn or Uranus, rather than something immeasurably larger and more terrifying.

"I didn't hate him," said Bell, the astronomer; and then, at the oxyacetylene stares from all three of his cellmates, added, "Well, I didn't. Sure, he refused to fund an

astro-seismic observatory in close Silmaril orbit for the next twelve months to witness the surface sliding into its mantle, but that's hardly a motive for murder; academics get their funding applications refused all the time."

"But one flawless five-carat Iridiamond like the one that's missing from Villanova's cabin would have paid for your observatory for twelve years," said the fat man facing Bell. "You could get rid of one. Any Silmarillian could. Four- and five-carat gems are as common here as gold dust used to be in the Klondyke; any halfway decent criminal could fence a five-carat. Isn't that true, Mr Dahlgren?"

The little man appeared unoffended by being asked for his opinion as a halfway decent criminal. "On a mining colony like this, with lucky strikes being made by independent prospectors all the time, I'd say yes. But this appears to have been an exceptional stone—"

"Gemstone," said the fat man. "The word is *gemstone*."

"The word is stone, as far as I'm concerned, Mr Canterbury. You *are* Walter Canterbury, aren't you? A 100,000-dollar rock full of neutronium motes can weigh up to a kilo. Even allowing for the use of special strong light alloys, the sort of jewellery you can make with a gem of that sort of mass would literally add weight to the adage that a wedding ring is a bachelor's ball and chain."

The fat man's face crinkled like a deflated balloon. "We tend to concentrate on the heavy-duty end of the jewellery market. Crowns and tiaras and diamond-studded cadillacs, rather than engagement rings."

"Any business that concentrates on specialized corners of its industry is doomed to failure," said Dahlgren.

"As my own research has conclusively proved in this case," agreed Bell.

Dahlgren nodded. "If your company had diversified into the *real* diamond business, they would still have a planet to mine, somewhere. Interests to cover the loss of the Silmaril mines. As it is, I doubt whether any of their existing capital is insured against being gobbled up by a neutron star."

"By a black hole, yes," said Canterbury, gloomily looking at his feet, as if his paunch were transparent. "By a neutron star, no. Dr Bell assured us it was impossible, that neutronium motes that hadn't lodged in hard materials would have simply shot through Silmaril and out the other side." He cast a venomous glance at Bell. "According to Dr Bell's theories of *last* year, that is."

"I think I hear an unspoken 'Damn his stinking carcass.'"

"He was a fool! Lloyd's are refusing to pay up on precisely that technicality. The difference may seem trifling, but there can be over a solar mass of difference between a black hole and a pulsar, and it's a world full of mining equipment expensively transported out here from Sol they'll end up paying for if the judgment goes against them. *I* sure wouldn't pay."

"Villanova was your accountant?"

"Safety officer. Responsible for everything from the safety guards on the mining drills to the decompression valves that stop your ass being sucked outside every time you take a dump, and I couldn't touch him in any way short of firing him."

"Pardon me, Mr Canterbury," said Dahlgren, smiling,

"but surely you're responsible for your *own* bankruptcy?" He fished out the irritating little black box from his breast pocket.

The fat red face went white as steel in a furnace.

"You little – you little – I *own* the police on this planet – I'm only in here for show! I'll be out of here inside an hour, I'll have you – have you—"

"Killed?" said Dahlgren pleasantly. He held the box up, flipped it open, and inspected whatever contents it held with an appraising eye. Whatever he found was cause for him to smile distantly.

The fat man's face flashed red again with the swiftness of a traffic light.

"You're right, mister," said the woman. "His alibi means nothing. He of all of us could have afforded to hire a professional assassin while he sat in the Bar Barry and sipped cocktails."

"Yes, of course," said Dahlgren. "But unfortunately you're also wrong. No professional assassin would come out so far. Assassins need job security like anyone else, and in a population of only 10,000, most of whom are on low wages, there are going to be a limited number of people who want other people dead and can pay for the privilege. All the professionals I know work inside the Earth's atmosphere. Captain Heavy Metal is overstretched with his current contracts in Tokyo, the Keyholer is lying low after he botched a government contract in Riyadh, and the Dark Shadow of the Scythe is currently undergoing surgery to remove his haemorrhoids in Switzerland." He spoke with the absolute assurance of a man who swam in those sort of murky waters. "So, if Mr Canterbury had done it, he would have had to do it himself." Dahlgren turned to the woman. "What's this Bar Barry you were talking about? It sounds *terribly* interesting."

The woman sat stoically through a second-long starquake with the hatred women normally reserve for husbands snoring in bed. "On the night Villanova was killed, we all received anonymous notes telling us to go to Bar Barry at a certain time, dressed in miner's civvies, and wait for half an hour."

"I wouldn't go. Certainly not if I were Walter Canterbury and my face were painted on every miner's punchbag round this planet." Dahlgren bowed pleasantly to Canterbury. "Apologies to you, sir, but you really are intensely and catholically disliked."

"They've good reason to," said Canterbury. "They've all lost two-, three-, four-year contracts. They'll all be working the rest of their lives now paying for the trip back home, which the company can no longer afford to cover. I went to the Bar, Dahlgren, because my anonymous note suggested I would hear something to my credit regarding how to prove our case against the insurance company. Something about a Supreme Court ruling concerning the destruction of the US Deep Space Weapons Cruiser *Hyman Rickover*, which was struck by a micro-collapsar in 2220. The vessel strayed too close to the C of G and fell in, but of course, light never escapes from the Event Horizon, so the Defence argued successfully that it could be proved conclusively that, because the vessel had been struck by a micro-collapsar, it could never be proved conclusively

whether the vessel had been destroyed by a micro-collapsar or a micro-pulsar. Naturally, I was interested."

"I went because *my* note said there was an anonymous billionaire willing to fund our seismic laboratory," said Bell.

"And you two?" Dahlgren looked at the big man and the woman with the big blue eyes that couldn't possibly do anyone any harm.

"I went because my note said Canterbury was going to be there," said the man, and added, matter-of-factly, "if he had been there, I was going to kill him."

The woman looked at the man with an odd expression of comradeship. "What a coincidence," she said. They both stared at Canterbury, who lowered his head and stared at the floor, as if it alone might want to be his friend.

"Unfortunately, we were both carrying coners when we were picked up by the police," said the big man. "Someone had sent them an anonymous note too."

"Coners?" This was a piece of criminal jargon unfamiliar to Dahlgren.

"Oh, sorry. Short-range hand-held mining cutters. Intended to ream out cone-shaped lumps of Iridiamond from the face. You can't cut the stuff out with a drill or thermic lance – it re-welds itself. It's got thousands of little internal short-range gravitational fields helping it hold together. Coners are programmed to cut along a line between the neutronium specks. But they can make pretty darn lethal close-range weapons, too, if you disarm the safety features."

"And I presume *your* cutter was so disarmed?"

"Of course. If I'd spotted Canterbury before the Feds had spotted me, I fully intended to kill him with it."

"Just because he lost you your job by going bankrupt?"

The big man frowned. "Ah. Of course. You're new in town. You won't have heard of GIDS."

"I'm afraid not. Could you enlighten me?"

The frown, unaccountably, became a smile. "According to Canterbury's tame doctors – no offence intended, ma'am – GIDS does not, never has, and never will exist. After all, look at me – I'm perfectly fine, and I've been living here for over ten years—"

The woman, who no one apart from Dahlgren had been paying any attention to, had been rocking backwards and forwards on her bench. Suddenly, she rocked forwards and carried on going towards the fat man.

"*You murdering fat fuck,*" she said, and carried on the conversation in the same vein while clawing for the fat fuck's eyes.

Nobody in the cell made a move to stop her (except for the fat man, of course, who was understandably biased). Dahlgren put his hands over his ears and, unaccountably, began to hum deeply and distinctly. The Violence In Cell warning light came on in the ceiling as sniffers bio-engineered from shark olfactory tissue scented blood, and the cell filled with a horrible high-pitched keening sound.

When the screws piled into the cell ten minutes later, only Dahlgren was still conscious.

Outdoors on Silmaril was like standing on split-level crazy paving. The ground had been splintered by so many quakes that blocks of planetary crust lay tilted,

uplifted, bent and sheared in all directions. Occasionally, a minor quake hit and sizzled the alkane snow near Dahlgren's feet, making seeing the surface difficult.

"This suit is huge. I can hardly move. *Oof.* I keep bumping into my own recycler tube."

"Everything has to be big 'n bulky here. Tiny components tempt fate. We're only just outside Nemesis's Roche Limit here, remember, and the fact that Nemesis's gravitational field fluctuates every time shit goes down makes tidal effects even nastier. If we used fly-by-wire vehicles, for example, the first gravity wave storm through their processors would tumble them in flight, to say nothing of the storm of high-frequency electromagnetics that flies off Nemesis all the way through the day—"

"*Ow.*"

"Take it easy. Your suit weighs about 50 kilos, and you probably weigh about a hundred yourself in this gravity. Suit's as stiff as it can be, to hold up as much of its own weight as it can, but –"

"Look, what are we doing out here?"

The Lieutenant chuckled through the linking cable. "Taking you back to the scene of your crime, Mr Dahlgren."

"Huh! Half an hour more of this and you won't have to beat me up in the cell, I'll have done it to myself. Which reminds me. How is Canterbury?" said Dahlgren, eyeing the surface with distrust.

"Fine. More shocked than anything. In an isolation cell, for his own protection."

"I'm surprised he wasn't in one before! She could have killed him on her own, but if the big guy had pitched in too, he could have given Canterbury a new outlook on life from between his buttocks."

"Little you know," said Sforza, nodding to the Federal officer standing by the inflatable police lock. No air had been allowed into or out of the giant bubble tent covering the cabin since the discovery of the crime. The atmosphere beyond the temporary pressure seal was evidence. In a pressure-sealed crime scene, frozen air vented from a man's suit could be matched against a sample taken at the station.

Dahlgren looked up at the unwieldy structure as they approached it. "That's a *house*? It looks more like a water tower."

"If you looked at the underside of Canterbury City, you'd see those same flexible legs. A whole forest of them. Come quake-time, the whole damn thing tapdances on the surface. What we're feeling now is an earthquake, you understand, caused by the baby neutron star kicking inside the mummy planet's tummy, not a starquake, which is caused by gravity wave emission from Nemesis."

"I'm beginning to be able to tell the difference. Your whole body sort of ripples with a starquake." Dahlgren looked up at the huge structure, like one of the first lunar modules with its huge jointed legs. "Why did Villanova live out here on his own?"

"He didn't. Not all the time. This is a sabbatical cabin."

"A what?"

"A sabbatical cabin. Odd thing about living in a few pressurized rooms with only a few people for company;



makes people want to be even more alone. You know how you row with the wife when you're not working?"

Dahlgren coughed. "Erm – well – no, not really. Some people seem to like doing it, but Margaret and I never really saw the attraction."

Sforza looked at Dahlgren's visor long and hard, and saw only his own reflection. "Well, this is what *normal* people do, Mr Dahlgren. Most of our miners share dorms. A sab cabin's like heaven after that. The men positively queue up to go."

"So Villanova got told to come out here by his psychiatrist?"

"Villanova probably told the psychiatrist to tell him to. He was getting pretty paranoid toward the end."

"The way everything sounds so far, it seems he had good reason to be. Do we go up this ladder into the lock?"

"Yes. Careful you don't fall; you'll fall twice as fast as normal, twice as heavily, and you'll be falling on me."

"Hello, Edgar."

Dahlgren blinked only once.

"Hello, Special Agent Hurtado. How little this slight passage of time has dulled your beauty."

The Marshal grinned round a cigar. "Actually, I'm a Marshal now. I have a ten-gallon space helmet and everything. How are you? How is your wife?"

She motioned Dahlgren to a padded chair, which he accepted gratefully in the heavy gravity.

"Inspector – sorry, Marshal – you know I wouldn't have done a thing like this. I'm afraid Margaret passed away last year."

Hurtado seemed genuinely shocked. "Oh god, Edgar, I'm sorry."

"Don't be. She was in no pain. One of the only mitigating factors about her condition was that it desensitized nerve tissue."

Hurtado nodded. "I know you didn't do this, Edgar. I just want a line on whoever did."

Dahlgren swivelled round in his seat, narrowly missing Lieutenant Sforza. The cabin was only built for one. "So he died in here, did he? Shot with a coner, I believe."

"Yes. Scooped out the whole of the back of his head. He was tied and bound at the time. Then the killer took the gem, the big one that Villanova had received as a present a month ago from Canterbury, and left." The Lieutenant saw Dahlgren's face twist in distaste at the mention of Iridiamond gems.

"So easy," said Dahlgren. "So why did such a widely-hated man come out to a sabbatical cabin without a weapon or an alarm uplink? I saw no security devices at all when we came in here, and I have a very thorough eye."

"He had the best security available – at least, that's what he thought. See this little box here? And this one? And this one? Spaced out all round the perimeter of the cabin. Try and guess what they are."

"The best security available?"

"Exactly. What do you do, Edgar, speaking as a professional, if a joint you're hitting has infra-red passive security lights? You wear infra-red-insulating clothing. What do you do if a building has radar sentries on its

perimeter? You borrow a radar-scatter suit from a friend in the National Guard. What do you do if a building has light beams? You spray some Lazaway around, find out where the beams are and make sure you don't cross them.

"But how do you deal with a system that can detect you, *wherever* you are, *whatever* you wear to stop the thing's sensors working? And that," she tapped the nearest box, "is what this is. Want to know how it works?"

Dahlgren seemed unimpressed. "These statements you are making are patently absurd, since someone obviously did get past this impassable defence – but carry on, I'm interested."

"It's a mascon detector," said Hurtado. "Miners use them to follow which way the lode's going. An iridium lode can have anything from 50 to a hundred times the density of the rock that surrounds it, and will register on gravitational detectors, like these. But the sensitivity of these things has improved over the years to the extent that they're now being exported for use in conventional lead and gold mining. And security. Or at least, that was what Villanova figured on making money out of doing. He'd had patents drawn up, and working models – *these* working models – made, and everything."

"So, as I said, how did these marvellous devices fail to register an intruder?"

Hurtado made a face. "That's below the belt, Edgar. You know I have no idea."

"Occam's razor, then. Stop thinking of ways in which the device could have been circumvented, and start thinking of ways in which it could be Not Turned On in the First Place."

"Uh-uh. Thought of that. Not possible. When Villanova's life-signs transmitter failed, every Canterbury security man on the night hemisphere was up here before the emergency response team was, and the alarms went off fit to bust.. They were on all right, and working."

Dahlgren sat and thought. Hurtado presumed he was thinking – or, for all she knew, he could have been constipated.

Then, suddenly, he sat up. "Why'd you arrest all these people who got anonymous notes? They've been set up, quite obviously."

"A Canterbury comms site recently featured a satirical news item in which Mr Vulvanilla, Head of Security for the Kangaroo Corporation, says to the world: 'I am a happy man! High is my position in society! Much am I valued for my labours! O, who is this? A group of happy co-workers come to wish me well and fete my forthcoming retirement, no doubt!' There follows a scene in which Mr Vulvanilla is knifed by a group of indeed very happy smiling Canterbury employees with the faces of Doctor Bell, Doctor Jan Van Tienen, Mine Foreperson Bishop and, last but not least, Mr Walter Canterbury himself. Mr Vulvanilla's last words are *Et Tu, Walte*."

"I'm sorry, I didn't recognize two of those names – is Jan Van Tienen the big man, the one who wears the gloves?"

"He's a she. Doctor Van Tienen is Canterbury's chief company medical officer. I believe you observed her giving life-giving massage to Mr Canterbury's eyeballs with

her fingernails. Mr Bishop is the man with the gloves."

"I see. So they were logical candidates for a setup. By the way, what's GIDS?"

"Gravitationally Induced Debilitation Syndrome. Doesn't exist. Put it out of your mind."

"Does it not exist enough to make a man put on a hat and gloves to cover up his disfigurement?"

Hurtado puffed out a cloud of foul-smelling smoke. "How very perceptive of you, Edgar. GIDS's existence as a clinically diagnosable condition has never been proven until recently. Certain people, including Doctor Van Tienen, have been happily denying it for quite some time, and certain other people who don't happen to work for the Canterbury company have been alleging they deny it under company instruction to do so. Ms Van Tienen's opinion on the reality of GIDS altered recently, however. Her own son, who was two months old at the time, contracted it. GIDS is a condition similar to the symptoms construction workers on less turbulent planets experience when working with devices that produce constant violent vibration – road drills and the like. The human body is designed to grow in a constant unidirectional gravitational field – of course, low, high, and even zero G have proven not to affect human tissue even under a lifetime of exposure, because the body has time to adjust to the different, though still constant, gravitational field. But Silmaril's gravitational field isn't constant, and whilst mere constant vibration can cause body tissue to grow aberrantly – blood vessels don't find the right way through muscle, broken bones don't heal properly – constant gravitational fluctuations, or what we call star-quakes, can cause even more serious effects, particularly on delicate tissue like gas IC's or optic logic units. Or human DNA."

Hurtado stubbed her cigarette out on the nearest gravity alarm.

"GIDS, of course, affects growing bodies more than grown ones. Toussaint Van Tienen was only vaguely human by the time he died. As for Archibald Bishop – and yes, he is indeed Archbishop of Canterbury, I had trouble believing that one myself – he has suffered a variety of painful cancers for the last three years. He has – as has Doctor Van Tienen – lost friends to GIDS. He would cheerfully murder Walter Canterbury and has admitted as much."

Dahlgren was clearly appalled. Mere Grand Theft appeared to be nothing compared with what honest men got up to. "And I suppose Villanova was one of Canterbury's henchmen, and in the front line in declaring GIDS was a fraud."

"Absolutely. He recently had the dubious honour of laughing Doctor Van Tienen out of court. And he did laugh, by the way; I have it on tape. I really don't know why I'm bothering to investigate the little creep's murder, to be quite honest –"

"Because another little creep did it to him," said Dahlgren, and meant it. "I feel very strongly about people who kill other people just to steal ice. Particularly heavy ice."

Hurtado drew patterns in the ash with her finger.

"Now, perhaps I'm being a little slow here. I thought the theft of the gem – sorry, the *rock* – was just a smoke-screen to conceal the *real* motive for the killing, which was revenge for either GIDS, bankruptcy, or withholding of academic funds, take your pick."

She looked up at Dahlgren.

"So – I'm listening."

Canterbury, the financial genius, the man born with a knack for seeing a niche in the market to fill with his considerable bulk, sweated like several fat pigs in a poke. His face was beginning to heal beneath the no-man's-land of bandages.

"They were stitching my eye when the 'quake hit," he said to Dahlgren, since no one else was listening. "The autosurgeon darn near poked me in it."

Two armed federal cops were sitting along one wall. Armed and big. Doctor Van Tienen and Bishop looked suitably chastened. Bell was trying not to get between Bishop and Van Tienen and Canterbury. He looked nervous, and kept looking at his watch.

"Hope we can get this over with by ten," he said. "There's going to be a very interesting Annihilation Event this evening."

"You mean a Superbowl game?" said Dahlgren, smiling, looking round the expanse of the Silmaril Marshal's office gymnasium, cramped by Earth standards but a vast vault of agoraphobic space by Canterbury City ones.

"No," said Bell, as if an American Indian had said, *ah, when you say Airplane, white man, you mean Great White Bird*. "I mean a billion-tonne lump of crystalline carbon falling into Nemesis. A quite sizeable chunk of the Iceberg should whiz round Nemesis and out the other side into a minor planetoid we've positioned in orbit for experimental purposes. We got approval to use a low-grade berg, to see what the effects of neutronium sling-shotting out of Nemesis and hitting rock would be in reality, as opposed to theory. It's the test, really, of my theory as to whether or not this planetary surface is going to sink beneath the neutronium waves."

Canterbury did not take the bait, if this was bait.

"You were authorized to use a billion-tonne chunk of *diamond*?" Dahlgren was suitably impressed.

"Yes, of course. It was of no special worth; there were no iridium deposits in it. Don't forget, diamond is like sand here. This world had plenty of surface carbon – the metamorphic marble deposits that belt the equator probably used to be coral reefs, and there may even have been primitive petrified forests on the nightside. It's really poked a hole in the world diamond markets. You should know that."

"Indeed," said Dahlgren sadly. "By now, just about the only diamonds of any worth are ones of extremely rare composition, the ones that just couldn't form on Silmaril due to the lack of suitable surface elements. Did you know, for example, that there's virtually no boron on Silmaril?"

"I did," growled Canterbury. "We have to use plain martensite for all our external construction members. Not as strong. Has to be bigger and heavier. Bloody expensive."

"Bloody expensive..." he repeated, looking at the floor as if at the neutronium planetary sub-basement rushing up to engulf him.

"The price of diamonds is why I retired five years ago," said Dahlgren. "I thought I'd come up here to have a look at my greatest enemy, the one that turned me from a life of crime. No police officer, but economic circumstance."

Federal Marshal Hurtado entered the room. The two cops sprang to attention.

"Ah, Marshal Hurtado," said Bell, with a smile that could kill a diabetic at ten paces. "Could you tell us what time we're likely to be out of here?"

"Very soon," said Dahlgren.

Bell's attention switched from Hurtado to Dahlgren. "Very good, Marshal. You said that without moving your lips."

Hurtado returned Bell's smile. Her teeth were sharper. "Dr Bell, Mr Dahlgren is no longer one of our suspects. You may consider him an expert consultant for the remainder of this interview."

"Very well. Though he still seems by far the most likely candidate to me."

"What's that red circle on the floor?" said Canterbury suddenly, looking at the line warily, as though it were the halo of a giant avenging angel. He giggled nervously. "Is it a penalty area?"

"I was hoping someone would ask that," said Hurtado. "These grey boxes you see spaced round the inside of the red line are devices some of you may recognize. One of you, in particular."

No one admitted to recognizing the boxes.

"They're mascon detectors," said Hurtado. "Part of Mr Villanova's home security system, if you will. They detect mass. The red circle marks their approximate radius of effectiveness against a man-massive intruder. Mr Canterbury, would you mind getting up and walking toward the red line?"

Meek as a lobotomized lamb, Canterbury got up and walked. Alarm bells clamoured in the boxes. Canterbury seemed to jump in genuine fright. Hurtado flicked an improvised switch taped to the wall and the alarms switched off.

"A miners' security system, and an admirable one," said Bell. "Gravity sensors."

"Typical," said Canterbury. "The only way he could have got hold of gravity sensors would be to cannibalize company property."

"You seem to have a good understanding of the concept, Dr Bell," said Dahlgren. "They do indeed detect the almost negligible gravitational field given out by a human body. Ms Van Tienen – would you mind walking towards the line, please?"

Shrugging, Van Tienen got up and walked. And carried on walking, till she stood in the centre of the circle.

"Not a very good security system," scoffed Canterbury. "Even if he *was* a thief."

"Ms Van Tienen isn't heavy enough," said Dahlgren. "The device is only so sensitive. Now *you* try, Dr Bell."

Bell looked almost as alarmed as the boxes. Slowly, he rose, and walked, even more slowly – and no alarm went

off.

"It triggers at 75 kilos," said Hurtado. "Mr Bishop would have set it off. You were all weighed when you were arrested; this demonstration was only held to prove to you that these alarms work, but *only* if the intruder's mass is large enough to trigger them."

"How much did we all weigh?" said Canterbury nervously.

"As a matter of fact, only Dr Bell and Ms Van Tienen weighed in under 75 kilos," said Dahlgren, not without a twinkle of amusement.

"So this proves that either myself or Bell killed Villanova. Which means Bell killed him," said Van Tienen, sitting back down in her chair looking utterly homicidal. She extended a handful of pointy fingernails for Bell to shake. "I congratulate you on a sterling murder, doctor."

"Would that that were true," said Dahlgren, smiling, "but alas, it isn't that simple. You seem to have forgotten that there was no atmosphere outside the cabin perimeter at the time."

Across the room, Bell clicked his fingers. "Suits!"

Dahlgren smiled. "*Someone* here knows how it went on the night in question, at least."

Bishop cut in, ignoring Dahlgren. "Yes! Suits! Suits here have to mass at least 25 kilos! It couldn't have been any of us!"

"Quite right," said Dahlgren. "Of course, the problem we now face is that it so obviously *was* one of you – and yet," and here his eyes gleamed like the bits of metamorphosed coal that he stole, "the fact remains, the alarm did not go off."

He let this sink in. The features of his audience lengthened visibly. They were still in the shit.

"Don't worry. There *is* a logical solution," he grinned. "*This* device is set at 75 kilos."

Bell clicked his fingers again. "But you never said Villanova had his sensor set at 75 kilos!"

"Precisely, though you're missing a second point – Villanova did indeed have his sensor set at over one hundred kilos, *when it was found*. But that doesn't mean the murderer didn't reset the device to make us *think* he couldn't have committed the crime before leaving the scene. There is one fact that is definite, however – these units aren't too sensitive. Villanova, so I'm told, to get his hands on mine safety sniffers actually *designed* to look for human beings trapped on the other side of buried rubble, rather than these prospecting devices, none of which can normally be set to locate masses any lower than 115 kilos. It took quite a bit of ingenuity for Marshal Hurtado's lab to alter them to locate masses less substantial. Any of you could have triggered the alarm, then – *but only if you had been wearing suits*."

He looked round, not at the shocked faces he had expected, but at faces of unanimous grinning ridicule.

"Er – you can't do that," said Canterbury. He looked round at his co-suspects. "Can you?"

"Windborne gamma would give you skin cancer inside ten yards," said Van Tienen. "This world is a big planet-sized carcinogen, Mr Dahlgren. Even building concrete has to be imported."

"And I'm sure you would be really eaten up about that, wouldn't you?" said Dahlgren. "A woman who assaults the most powerful man on the planet, while under police custody? Who admits she wouldn't have minded killing Villanova anyway?"

"It is possible," interrupted Bishop. "It's been done. Two friends of mine transferred a stretcher case from a downed passenger walker to a Russian rescue hopper with an incompatible airlock. They only had two suits. They just dashed him out one lock and in the other, double quick. But of course, they, er, later died of skin cancer," he added guiltily.

"So you agree it's been done, Mr Bishop," said Dahlgren. "But it's cold enough to freeze methane out there, and our man is moving around under his own power." He stood up, walked to the edge of the red circle. "He has to stop, just outside alarm range, and he doesn't know where alarm range is! Better to be safe than sorry." He jumped back from the circle. "So *here*, he stops and takes his suit off in double time." He made phantom spacesuit-doffing gestures. "That'll take about – what? Ten seconds for a fast man?"

"Five seconds, for any miner," said Bishop, without pride.

"Five seconds, then. Then he's got to race toward the ladder, run up it –" he ran toward the red circle, and Hurtado obligingly turned off the alarm. "And, oh dear. He has a problem. He puts his hand on the first rung of the cabin access ladder, and guess what?"

Bishop wasn't quite so happy with the trend of events now. "His hand cold-welds to the ladder."

"Precisely, Mr Bishop. So, our hypothetical murderer is in a dilemma. Either he leaves the skin of his palms on the ladder, causing excruciating pain, or he dies out there in the cold. So he does it. It's painful, and the blood gushes out in the near-vacuum that you call an atmosphere here, but he manages it. And jams his 'coner' in the airlock handle, and gains access to the cabin and kills Mr Villanova. Would you care to show us the palms of your hands that you've been keeping so carefully in your gloves all this time, Mr Bishop?"

Bishop looked at Van Tienen. He didn't seem worried. Van Tienen shrugged. "Show him."

With some difficulty, Bishop unclipped the gloves from his wrists and peeled them off. From the wrist downwards, his hands were steel, shined to a polish, jointed and shaped like real hands.

"They wanted to give me flesh-effect ones, but I thought steel more honest," he said.

Hurtado looked at her own face staring back at her in some dismay out of Bishop's palms.

"That's *it*?" she said to Dahlgren. "That's your big theory?"

Dahlgren contemplated himself in the same mirror, and grunted out a reluctant laugh.

"You win some, you lose some," he said. "Oh course, this doesn't prevent Mr Bishop from having coned the cadaver. In fact, he is still the prime suspect. With hands that powerful, it's easy to explain how Villanova's neck was broken. Mr Bishop wanted to simply squeeze the life out of Villanova, but the strength afforded him by those prodigious mechanical hands was enough to actually snap his victim's neck. And of course, he left no finger-

prints – because he has none."

Mr Bishop's smile had become broader and broader, and sadder and sadder. As Dahlgren finished expostulating, he looked up.

"Would you care to shake hands, Mr Dahlgren?" he said.

Dahlgren looked at the steel. "Care to arm-wrestle? Care to play knuckles? You'll win, erm, hands-down, every time."

Bishop stretched his fingers out and regarded them admiringly. "They've just managed to perfect a 48-hour battery life for these babies, which at least means I don't need to wire myself up to the mains with my teeth overnight any more. Of course, the more I use them, the quicker I lose juice. That's why they were set up for a maximum one-kilo pressure at the factory. I prefer long battery life to Fearsome Power. After all – would *you* want to hug your kid goodnight with hands that could snap a man's neck like celery?"

"I see," said Dahlgren. He turned back to Hurtado.

"No further questions, Your Honour. But I'd like to talk to the staff at the Bar Barry."

"Be my guest," said Hurtado, and flipped a holophone projector into Dahlgren's hands. "The number's stored."

Carefully, Dahlgren selected the number and bowled the projector into the centre of the floor. It grew tripedal legs, then shot up into a six-foot figure of a man.

"Barry Kamarling."

"Hello," said Dahlgren. "I'm – ah – I'm with the Marsharcy, and I wondered if I might ask you a few questions regarding the alibis of Messrs Bishop, Van Tienen, Bell and Canterbury."

The man was a barman, wiping a glass. "Fire away. That's what one of them did, ain't it?" So funny was the joke that he laughed out loud.

"Quite. Mr Kamarling – were you on duty at the time of the murder?"

"Yup. Saw all four of 'em. At different times, though, like I said in the statement. Bishop came in and we talked about whether he pulls his wiener off if his right hand malfunctions while he's feeling lonely. Dr Van Tienen came in and tried to sit on her own and turned down three and a half men. One of the men weren't a miner, so it only counted half. Dr Bell came in and sat dictating to a notepad, and old man Canterbury came in after an armed bodyguard and left in front of it. Man, was I ever mad. Canterbury walks into a bar hereabouts, all the drinkers leave."

"And did any of them do anything else while they were in the bar?"

"Nope. Canterbury had about three clients in the bar as holophones. Looked to be from the L5 station by the timelag in conversation. None of the bodyguards left the bar, not even to pee. It's common knowledge Canterbury *does* things to his bodyguards *medically*, so they don't *need* to pee. Dr Bell made a call to the observatory. Dr Van Tienen got bleeped and called up a holophone of a junior to take the bleep for her. He was in bed butt-naked at the time, bang in the middle of the bar table. We found it amusing."

The bar was dimly visible behind Kamarling, and was



getting busy. Two apparent drunks were taking swings at one another with prosthetics they'd unstrapped from the stumps of their shoulders and were using as clubs.

"Sorry an that," said Kamarling. "Got two giddies to deal with. I'll call you back."

The screen went blank.

Dahlgren paced about the room, staring at things only his own eyes were polarized to see, fiddling nervously in his hip pocket, probably with the infernal black box that had come here with him.

"The detectors were working properly. The tolerance set to 95 kilos. A man in a suit weighs too much. The detectors are infallible. Gravity cannot be insulated against. Gravity cannot be reflected or absorbed—"

The whole room shook as if with the process of Dahlgren's thought. Hurtado knew that people could die of starquake shock. An artery could burst. The vagus nerve in the neck could constrict and BLAM the heart would stop —

Dahlgren paced across the room, still muttering. "But a human being can't survive in a Silmarillian atmosphere without a suit for more than a matter of seconds —"

Hurtado blinked suddenly. She stared at the mascon detector as if daring it to change its physical state.

"— unless he or she had some sort of *lighter* pressure suit —"

"Dahlgren! Edgar!"

Dahlgren turned suddenly. "What?"

"Look where you are."

Dahlgren looked down. He was standing in the middle of the red circle.

He looked round. Every mascon detector was still switched on.

"We know how you did it, Bell."

Doctor Bell looked considerably more cocky than he had done half an hour earlier. This, in Hurtado's experience, signified guilt.

"Oh, really? I'd love to see some proof of this wild accusation."

"Your call to the observatory. Villanova thought he was safe in his sab cabin surrounded by mass detectors. But *you* knew better. You knew about the mass detectors, because they represented a requisition originally intended for your observatory, isn't that true?"

Bell seemed about to retort, then appeared to rethink and stayed silent. Hurtado continued, stabbing the air with a lighted cigar like a baton.

"You knew what Villanova intended to do with the detectors, and you knew how sensitive they were. You of all people knew it would have been impossible for anyone to slip past them. But you, alone among all people, knew exactly when those mass detectors would become completely unreliable — during the ten seconds or so of a really big starquake. And you knew when that exact starquake was going to hit, didn't you, Bell? A starquake happens every time a really big mass hits Nemesis, and you were going to chuck a chunk of diamond the size of Phobos down its gullet. But you had to make sure when. Even though the entire event was timed to go like clockwork,

you couldn't resist calling the observatory, just to make sure it was still going to happen at the appointed time."

"So where did I stash the Iridiamond?" said Bell. "If I killed Villanova, I also took the Iridiamond. So where did I stash it?"

"Same place you always stash them," said Hurtado. "You and your accomplices have killed three independent prospectors and private collectors over the past year, both here and back on Earth. I wanted concrete proof that you could have committed the crime — but I already know about your extra bank accounts, Dr Bell. I know about your foreign friends, and your holidays in places we're not supposed to be able to follow you. I know about your dead-letter drops and your observatory's anonymous benefactors and its equally anonymous deposit accounts in Switzerland."

Van Tienen looked at Hurtado in indignation. "You already *knew*?"

"Did you really think a benighted rock like this that puts the word 'colon' into 'colony' would merit a visit from a U.S. Marshal if it were just murder that was going on, Ms Van Tienen? This is way more important than simple blood and diamonds — isn't that so, Mr Canterbury?"

Canterbury hung his head in a defiant sulk. Hurtado continued. "For your information, as it's going to become public knowledge in the next few weeks anyway, once this place crumbles into its core, only about half of Iridiamond stock goes to jewellery, and that to jewellery belonging to members of the royal families and governments of countries considered to be friends of the United States. The other half go to... *other* purposes.

"Iridiamonds are called Iridiamonds because they bend light, effectively and in virtually all wavelengths, not just the visible. Cut and correctly configured, they can be used to direct a coherent light beam of virtually any power that can be pumped at them, in any direction desired, at any frequency desired, up to and including gamma."

Bishop gaped. "A graser," he hissed.

Hurtado nodded. "Or gamma-ray laser to the uninitiated. The Holy Grail of Blowing Fucking Great Holes in Stuff. We can't build one yet. We don't have the energy source to do it. But we think the Chinese might have. The only thing we're sure they *don't* have is a focusing device, and the reason why we know *that* is because they're trying so damned hard to get their hands on Iridiamonds. Old Man Canterbury here never was anything more than just a caretaker to other people's money. Big business never had a hand in putting up the funding for this place. It was the United States itself that placed a colony on Silmaril, and it did it solely in order to acquire these crystals for military applications."

Dahlgren sat and listened, and nodded sadly to himself.

Hurtado continued to address Bell. "You knew a starquake would disrupt the mass detector, didn't you? For the benefit of the tape, Dr Bell has just nodded. You knew it was designed to turn itself off in starquakes, to prevent false alarms. After all, Villanova had intended marketing it on Earth, where there are no starquakes, so this wouldn't have affected its operational effectiveness. But it would have been a hell of a drawback in sales demon-

strations. He must have told you that. He had no reason not to. He trusted you. You had no motive for killing him, unlike everyone else on the planet, yes?"

"I had no motive for killing him," nodded Bell, tears streaming down his face suddenly. Real or false, Hurtado could not tell.

"Little creep," said Hurtado, sipping at a decaffeinated coffee with three Nodoe pills swimming in it. "Betrays his country for a lousy few googolplex bucks. Where's the nearest Chinese embassy? I feel like giving away a few military secrets." She sniggered.

Dahlgren nodded. "It had to be Bell. He was the only suspect in any position to know *exactly* when the experimental mass his people were aiming at the collapsar would hit."

"Except he didn't," said Hurtado.

"What?"

"He didn't know, exactly. Iceberg 101 hit the event horizon exactly one minute *before* it was supposed to. Bell must have felt the starquake and had to run like hell. Observatory photos show quite clearly that some joker had drilled a hole in the back of the asteroid and fitted a miniature fusion-powered ion pusher to it. Observatory radio astronomy monitored a strong control signal coming from the pusher just prior to it hitting the event horizon, where indeed it's still transmitting to all intents and purposes. That signal was beamed in the direction of the tour vessel *Alvarez*. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

"Nope. Absolutely nothing. Besides, they took their billion-tonne diamond and threw it away. Who could blame anyone for going through their trash?"

"Point taken, but it *is* a billion-tonne diamond. Though only worth a fraction more than a billion-tonne brick these days, of course. What could you possibly get out of it? Assuming, of course, you stole it in the first place, which you evidently failed to accomplish, because it still fell into Nemesis."

Dahlgren's eyes glittered like titanium diamonds. "Oh no, I *did-n't*! It fell into Nemesis well and good, but remember, Nemesis is a big, star-sized collapsar, and it's spinning. Iceberg 101 fell in and shot straight back out at an earlier stage in the collapsar's history. Say 65 million years ago, when Nemesis was closer to the solar system. Then some enterprising jewel thief took a long-range prospector's scow out to the outer system, say, six months ago, strapped on another ion tug and boosted it on back to the inner system."

He was quite obviously dangerously insane. Hurtado was sure of that now.

"I knew I was going to do it," explained Dahlgren helpfully. "I'd been planning it for years. It was a reaffirmation of my faith in my abilities when I took the tug out to the edge of the system and found out I really had."

"Pardon?"

"Biggest ice heist ever pulled. Biggest that ever will be. Ice heists will soon be a thing of the past, you see. No money in them. I wanted to quit at the top. Besides, it's only ordinary white diamonds that are cheap even in our benighted times, Evie. Remember, black holes squash and deform matter. I said I was here at Nemesis as an

alloy steel additive dealer, didn't I? Well, what would happen if an additive dealer went out in an EVA suit and scattered a few hundred tonnes of boron ferrite all over the surface of the iceberg?"

Hurtado's eyes grew painfully wide. Dahlgren winked.

"One billion billion carats of fine sky-blue diamond. All mine, all mine. I'd only release it in small, ring-sized fragments, of course; all I'd need to do would be to jet over to it every now and again and chip off a royal-coronation-sized fragment. But that isn't the real reason why I came here to heist. You see, Marjorie's dead now, and..."

He slid out of his chair, and the gravity dropped him onto one knee. He flipped open the little black lid of his mysterious little black box. There was a ring in the box, nestling in fine velvet. Silver? No, maybe platinum. There was no gem in the ring, as yet.

"Of course, I may have a little trouble fitting the gem into the chasing..."

"Evelyn... will you marry me?"

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**Dominic Green** lives in Northampton, and works in computing. His previous stories for *Interzone* were "Moving Mysteriously" (issue 108), "Evertrue Carnadine" (issue 112), "Everywhen" (issue 118), "The Cozumel Incident" (issue 121), "Queen of the Hill" (issue 130), "That Thing Over There" (issue 132), "Dream Blue Murder" (issue 145), "Something Chronic" (issue 159), "Rude Elves and Dread Norse Reindeer" (issue 162), "Grass" (issue 168), "Queen of Hearts" (issue 173), "Blue Water, Grey Death" (issue 175) and "News from Hilaria" (issue 179).

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# The Revival of the Science-Fiction Novella

Bruce Gillespie

In 1999, American critic Gary Westfahl wrote an article for *Foundation* about the strengths of the science-fiction novella. At the end of his piece he wrote that “there is no real financial incentive for science fiction writers to produce novellas.” His article appeared just as, it seems, he was about to be proved wrong. The first successful venture in novella publishing for some years was about to be launched. This is a series of books, first published in 2000, edited by Peter Crowther for Gollancz in the UK, each about 90,000 words in length and containing four novellas. That three of these have appeared, and a fourth is said to be in the works, suggests that the novella form is not dead in science fiction. Indeed, after reading the three anthologies, *Four-sight*, *Futures* and *Infinites*, I can say that it is still as robust a form as it was in the early 1960s, when I first discovered many of my favourite sf novellas.

What is an sf novella? Is it, for example, the same as the literary novella, a form that, according to David Pringle, in his introduction to an anthology called *Leviathan 2* (Ministry of Whimsy Press, 1998), predates the novel itself? Pringle found that the novella began in Italy with Boccaccio's *The Decameron* in the 14th century. The word meant “small new thing,” and Boccaccio's novellas were really short stories. However, in English the word was shortened to “novel” in the 18th century, and grew somewhat. The novella, as a modern term, arose in Britain in the 1880s, to fit those works of fiction that were much longer than short stories, but which were very much shorter than those gigantic Victorian novels that littered the bookshelves. The best-known examples of turn-of-the-century novellas included Henry James's *Daisy Miller*, *The Aspern Papers* and *The Turn of the*

*Screw*, and, a few years later, James Joyce's finest work, “The Dead.” Pringle quotes Henry James as saying that the “nouvelle” (the French equivalent) offered “the best of both worlds.” As Pringle adds, “If the short story creates a character and a moment, and if the novel creates a community of characters and a ‘world,’ then the novella is approximately mid-way between the two: it creates a few characters, moving through a limited number of moments in an imaginatively circumscribed world. It shares in both the intensity of the short story and the expansiveness of the novel. At its best, it can have many of the finest qualities of both while retaining few of their faults (i.e. the oft-criticized ‘slightness’ of the short story and the ‘bagginess’ of the novel).”

A highly successful novella of the period was H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), which made Wells famous. It provided what I regard as the true beginning of science fiction, and also established the literary form that would flourish best in sf throughout the 20th century – that is, the novella. As David Pringle points out: “When we look to the origins of the science-fiction genre we find that many of the crucial works were novellas. Sir George Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking* (1871)” and “Edwin A. Abbott's *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*... were all of novella length, and it is hard to imagine them at any other length.” A great strength of *The Time Machine* is that its main narrative is told by a single, anonymous Time Traveller, who interacts only with a few people in his own era and some people in the far future. We are given the freedom to see a whole timescape through his eyes, without being too distracted by his personal characteristics.

The sf novella was not put into its own category, however, until the early

1950s, as I discovered thanks to a number of Internet correspondents. George Flynn can trace the use of the name back no further than February 1951, when, in a very early issue of *Galaxy*, H. L. Gold used the term for Ray Bradbury's “The Fireman,” which later became the novel *Fahrenheit 451*. Flynn writes: “There's no abbreviation for ‘novella in the Day Index, implying that no magazine had used the designation up to 1950.” Mark Owings notes that *Startling Stories* used the term “complete novel” in the 1940s, with the term standing for what we now call “novella.” John Boston writes that *Astounding* started to use the term “novel” for stories that were complete in one issue; again, we would use the term novella these days for the same length of story.

What happened to the novella when it arrived in the sf magazines? It took until the mid-1960s to be given a Nebula, followed by a Hugo category in 1968. The length of each category of fiction is now specified: a short story is anything up to 7,500 words, a novelette ranges from 7,500 to 17,500 words, and a novella is between 17,500 and 40,000 words. I agree with David Pringle when he says: “These categories may fit the market realities of the science-fiction magazines, but they seem to be both too precise... and to err too much on the side of brevity... I prefer to be less of a hairsplitter and to classify the short story as a piece of fiction of less than 10,000 words; the novelette as anything between 10,000 and, say, 20,000 words; and the novella as a work ranging from 20,000 to 50,000 words – approximately.”

Why have divisions of short fiction at all? I can only guess that the sf magazine editors, forever trying to do more with less money, hit on the categories as a way of encouraging casual

readers to buy the magazines. Open an sf magazine, in the days when you could find sf magazines at your local newsstand. The table of contents says to the reader: the magazine you are holding in your hand does not contain merely an episode of a serial and six short stories; it actually contains an episode of a serial, a novella, three novelettes and three short stories. This practice reached absurd lengths in *If* magazine in the early 1960s, when it was winning the Hugo for Best Magazine every year. Sometimes it would give the title of "short novel" or "novella" to a story as short as 35 pages, with "novelette" being pinned to anything over 19 pages.

These days I don't call any story a novella unless it runs over 55 pages, which by coincidence happens to be the length of the original version of J.G. Ballard's "The Drowned World" (*Science Fiction Adventures*, No. 24, 1962, with a wonderful cover by Brian Lewis). I remember crawling through that story, sentence by sentence, drowned in Ballard's hot, overflowing world, while sitting under an umbrella, watering the lawn at home with a hose because of extreme water restrictions, while Melbourne's mid-summer sun beat down on the umbrella. "Soon it would be too hot" is the story's first sentence. Its last sentence reads: "So he left the lagoon and entered the jungle again, within a few days was completely lost, following the lagoons southward through the increasing heat, attacked by alligators and giant bats, a second Adam searching for the forgotten paradises of the reborn Sun." So intense was that experience of reading the novella version that I have never read the novel-length version of *The Drowned World*.

*Science Fiction Adventures*, edited by E. J. ("Ted") Carnell, was one of two sister magazines of *New Worlds*, which was the main British sf magazine. Michael Moorcock became its editor in 1965. The other sidekick magazine was *Science Fantasy*, which became *sf Impulse* after Carnell relinquished editorship. *Science Fiction Adventures* lasted only until 1964. It was unique, in that it published only novellas and short stories. I bought it first in late 1959 because, at 2/6 (25 cents), it was the only sf magazine I could afford with the pocket money I then received. *Science Fiction Adventures* had been a short-lived American magazine (edited, I'm told, by Larry Shaw). Carnell published the British Reprint Edition of the magazine in 1958, then kept it going until he retired. It boasted many fine stories, including the three highly enjoyable "Society of Time" novellas by John Brunner, published later by Ace Books as *Times Without Number*; and the

publication of many stories by Australian writers. In No. 24, for instance, "The Drowned World" was accompanied by "Bliss," a novella by Australia's David Rome (David Boulton), and "Pressure," a short story by Lee Harding. Wynne Whiteford, who died on 30 September 2002, also often appeared in *Science Fiction Adventures*.

No American magazines specialized in novellas, but the average issue of one of the chunkier magazines, such as *Galaxy* and *Analog*, usually included one novella, several long novelettes, a number of short stories, as well as the episode of the current serial. The novella was a form by which an up-and-coming sf writer could put himself or herself on the map. Walter Miller Jr was already well known when he published the original novella of "A Canticle for Leibowitz," but when two more novellas appeared, the entire work became known as one of sf's most distinguished novels, although it is, strictly, a fix-up rather than a novel. James Blish's *A Case of Conscience* began as a novella, and many of us feel that the rest of the wordage in the novel version is merely padding. Gene Wolfe's three-part novel *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* began with the novella of that name, which still stands up quite well on its own. Keith Roberts's perennial classic *Pavane* emerged from several powerful novellas and short stories.

However, it has proved very hard over the years to sell a novella as a stand-alone book. Brunner usually had to expand his novellas into one half of an Ace Double before he could sell them in America. An exception is

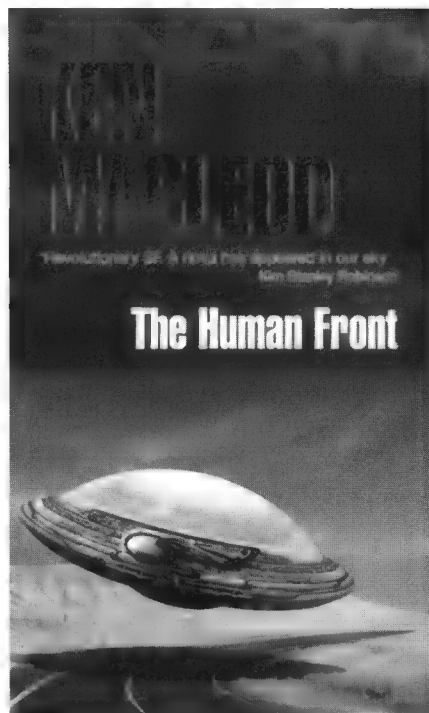
Fritz Leiber's Hugo-winning *The Big Time*, which is basically a play the length of a novella, although it was published as a novel.

Many of my favourite authors first made an impact on me through novellas. I had read nothing I liked of Brian Aldiss's until I read "The Saliva Tree," his tribute to H. G. Wells and H. P. Lovecraft, in *F&SF* in the mid-1960s. That was one of my most powerful reading experiences, with its truly horrifying last page. Cordwainer Smith's novelettes and novellas always seemed to be more substantial than his short fiction, and his novella "The Dead Lady of Clown Town" is a sublime reading experience. Probably the best novella writer is still Michael Bishop, who seems to shine only in the novella and short-story form. Many of the novelized versions of his short pieces seem to trip over their own feet, and retain little of the energy of the originals. Similarly, most of the best Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser stories of Fritz Leiber began as long novelettes or novellas.

In attempting to revive the sf novella in the anthology *Foursight* (Gollancz, 2000), Peter Crowther was fully aware of the gravity of what he was trying to do. In the Introduction, he describes how his first encounter with the novella was with one of the best of them all, Clifford Simak's "The Big Front Yard" in *Astounding*. He lists the first officially categorized novella as being in a *Galaxy* as late as 1955 (Robert Sheckley's "A Ticket to Tranai"). George Flynn's information appears to prove him wrong. And it's odd that, as a British writer, he doesn't mention the importance of *Science Fiction Adventures* to readers in Britain and the Commonwealth.

Crowther knows a good novella when he sees one, as his three anthologies show. *Foursight* includes four pieces of "dark fantasy," by Graham Joyce, James Lovegrove, Kim Newman and Michael Marshall Smith. *Futures* (2001) has stories by Stephen Baxter, Peter F. Hamilton, Paul McAuley and Ian McDonald. *Infinites* (2002) has stories by Eric Brown, Ken MacLeod, Alastair Reynolds and Adam Roberts. All the hotshots of current British sf, but very oddly, Crowther includes no women writers. I would have thought Gwyneth Jones and Mary Gentle, among many others, would have asked to take part in showpiece books such as these. The series has done so well that Gollancz has reissued the stories in other forms, including an equivalent of the paperback Ace Doubles.

The first story in *Foursight*, the first of these volumes, is Graham Joyce's





"Leningrad Nights." At only 42 pages, it isn't even the right length for a novella, but it feels like one. You will have to excuse me if I include a number of spoilers from now on. There's no way to talk about a story except to really talk about a story.

Novels have plots; novellas have trajectories. I decided this after rereading "Leningrad Nights." I noted that it includes a number of directional turning points, rather than plot developments. These in turn provide the surprises that make the story memorable. "Leningrad Nights" begins with a scenario that we think we know well: that of the million and a half people who died in Leningrad during the 900 days of siege during World War II. Will this story be one of unrelieved suffering? Perhaps not. Leo Shaporal, the main character, is extremely good at surviving in this uniquely bleak cityscape. Faced with starvation, he discovers a deposit of opium-soaked tea. After drinking this, he finds that the whole city becomes to him something almost supernatural. The Germans shell the city regularly every day, except on the days when they vary the routine. Leo becomes convinced that he will only die when The Whistling Shell finds him. Until then, he resolves to spend his time looking for people to help. Fuelled by the opium-soaked tea, he finds his personality seeming to split into two people, the person who scurries around the streets of Leningrad, and a doppelgänger who keeps offering him advice when it's least wanted. Leo's Uncle Yevgeny dies in his below-freezing flat, but oddly keeps offering him advice. Because of the fierce cold, his body does not decompose, and soon Leo, as well as other citizens of this city, find that there is more than one way to provide fresh meat.

The turning point of Leo's life is when he rescues Natasha, a prostitute who is about to give birth if she doesn't die first. Leo makes a soup for her based on his mysterious source of fresh meat mixed with the opium tea. Natasha revives, the baby is born, Leo takes responsibility for them both, then Natasha introduces him to a tiny cell of Christians who share the meagre resources they can put together. Leo becomes their only source of fresh meat, until the members of the Christian cell discover its source. Leo is nonplussed by their disgust at his actions; their own religion talks of turning water into wine and the wafer into the actual body of Jesus.

"Leningrad Nights" could be taken on a realistic plane, with the opium-flavoured tea as the source of all the "magical" things that happen to Leo. But the style of the story is so lucid, and its unfolding logic so perfect, that

one begins to see everything from Leo's viewpoint. He becomes more and more convinced of the extraordinariness of the world and human possibilities, even as his city is dying.

Another tale that works with a similar rhythm of unfolding possibilities is "Tendeléo's Story" by Ian McDonald (*Futures*). I haven't liked any of the other pieces of McDonald's fiction I've read, finding them arch and unnecessarily baffling. "Tendeléo's Story," however, has a lucid style, a strong story, and an even stronger sense of committed passion.

Nearly all the narrative is told in the first person by its main character, Tendeléo Bi, a girl growing up in Kenya. Most of the satisfactory stories in these volumes are written in the first person, an ideal way to write a novella. With the first-person narrator, the author can combine the intensity of using a narrow range of characters with the opportunity to concentrate on large stretches of historical or geographical background as needed. Like all good novellas, "Tendeléo's Story" is unencumbered by many of the millstones that usually drag down the sf novel. The writer does not feel compelled to create an entire other world, but through sketches can provide a picture so complete that the reader can fill in the rest.

As with many of the other stories in these volumes, "Tendeléo's Story" begins in a familiar world, which quickly becomes tantalizingly unfamiliar. Tendeléo is living in one of the most salubrious areas of Africa; there is plenty of food, and her home life is comfortable, being dominated by her

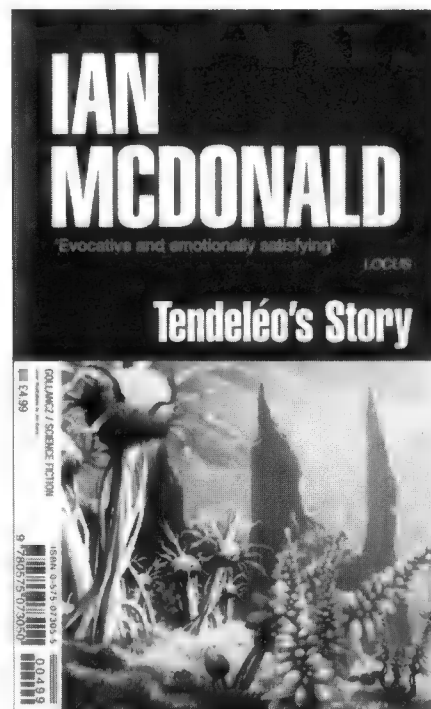
father, pastor of the local church. She might have led a very safe and fulfilling life, if it were not for the arrival of the Chaga.

It is not clear whether or not McDonald expects the reader of this novella to have read his novel *Chaga*. All the necessary background is in the novella. Tendeléo discovers, along with the other villagers, how the Chaga will threaten her life. The Chaga are an interstellar life form. Pods of Chaga land across the southern hemisphere, and spread outwards, at 50 metres a day, in a precise circle. Inside the Chaga-contaminated circles, everything changes into areas of "bright and silly colours." All normal vegetation disappears, to be replaced by vast structures seemingly made of spores. These structures, it is discovered, are built of nanomachines as small as a molecules. The purpose of the Chaga is unknown.

The United Nations, believing that nothing could stay alive within the Chaga, prevents any humans from staying behind in the area being eaten up. This means that most of the people of the southern hemisphere become refugees. The story gives us an insight into how becoming a refugee destroys all the structures of a person's physical and psychological existence. This has an obvious echo in today's world, with its 20 million refugees, largely as a result of wars. Also, McDonald is no doubt trying to show us some idea of the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on Africa today. Science-fiction fans will recognize a much more obvious parallel: the alternative universe in Greg Egan's latest novel, *Schild's Ladder* (2002). As that universe spreads outward, at half the speed of light, it swallows solar system after solar system. As in "Tendeléo's Story," people flee from the alien invader, believing that it merely destroys humanity.

McDonald takes away every one of the assumptions upon which Tendeléo has built her life. Fortunately, he makes her strong enough to ride the wave of calamities. She and everybody from her town is forced to leave for the shanty towns of Nairobi. Before they leave, she goes to have a look at the Chaga:

I saw jumbles of reef-stuff the colour of wiring. I saw a wall of dark crimson trees rise straight for a tremendous height. The trunks were as straight and smooth as spears. The leaves joined together like umbrellas. Beyond them, I saw things like icebergs tilted at an angle, things like open hands, praying to the sky, things like oil refineries made out of fungus, things like brains and fans and domes and footballs. Things like other things. Nothing that seemed a



thing in itself. And all this was reaching towards me. (*Futures*, p251)

She goes with her family to the shanty town outside Nairobi, but finds that the only job she can find is becoming a courier of illicit spores, smuggled out of the Chaga, which she delivers to the Americans on behalf of the local gang boss. As the Chaga edges into both sides of Nairobi, the United Nations pulls out. There is no law any more; the gangs kill each other off. A Chaga pod lands on the house of Tendeléo's family, so they are lost to her. She just manages to catch a plane out of Nairobi, ends up in England, and meets Sean, who tells part of the story.

All this seems to roll on at a ferocious pace, but that's only because McDonald leaves out everything but the essentials. His language is vibrant, and many of Tendeléo's observations of the world are sharp and funny. That's what can be done in a novella: write a very contracted, taut narrative, but still give plenty of scope for revealing the future world.

A story that works rather differently from the others in the Crowther volumes is James Lovegrove's "How the Other Half Lives" (*Foursight*), which is more an extended parable than an sf or fantasy story. It is based on the same idea that Ursula Le Guin used in her short story "The Ones That Walked Away from Omelas," that is, as a kind of compensation for great success or great goodness in human existence, there is an equation that demands that somewhere there must be someone locked away deep in a cellar, forever condemned to be tormented.

William Ian North has an unbelievably successful life, controlling half the world's money, and taking pleasure in every aspect of his personal existence. Once a day he goes down into the depths of his magnificent house, enters a grubby cell, and nearly beats the life out of the totally wretched prisoner who lives there. We

guess the relationship between them long before it is revealed; the interest of the story is that every second section of the story gives us the viewpoint of the prisoner. The prisoner, despite his continual suffering, never suffers from despair. His captor gives him one match a day, with which he can light one candle. In the light of the candle he sees a mouse. The prisoner offers the mouse a portion of his meagre ration of cheese. He uses the stump of the match to draw shapes on the wall. Although the prisoner cannot quite believe it, he sees that the mouse recognizes the shapes he draws. A glimmer of hope occurs to the prisoner. As his plan unfolds, the life of William Ian North begins to disintegrate.

There is a lot more to the story than that, but it is all the more enjoyable for the fact that Lovegrove does not even pretend that it is a realistic story. It is a fantasy a bit less elaborate than Stephen King presents in "Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption" or *The Green Mile*, but it would also make a good film. The story would not work as a continuous narrative told by either the captor or the prisoner, but the interweaving of the two viewpoints gives it suspense and effectiveness.

An sf short story relies upon its central idea, but except for real masterpieces, such as the original version of "Flowers For Algernon," it cannot imply a great deal more than the central idea. An sf novel at its best is a real novel that happens to take place in the future, or perhaps an alternative present or past, filled with interesting characters, both plots and subplots, all that texture and superstructure that very few writers can manage. In a novella, the writer can keep the main theme in mind all the way through, but present a series of surprises that provide a satisfying sense of story. At its very best, a novella can, as in Alastair Reynolds' "Diamond Dogs" (*Infinites*), bring the narrator and reader face to face with the truth that "We can't assume any-

thing." Take away all certainties, and one has the ideal sf story.

A novella can go wrong, as a few do in Crowther's volumes. In Ken MacLeod's "The Human Front" (*Infinites*), the result can be frustrating, because most of the story is excellent. MacLeod tells of an alternative world in which America began, and seemed to win, the Third World War with selective atomic bombing of targets across the world. MacLeod is the only current sf writer who has enough political savvy to work out the pattern of politics that might follow from such a scenario. But then, right at the end, he waves the magic wand, draws aside the curtain – and it's only bloody aliens again! Clunk, clung, cliché science-fictional element, and the intricate world-building of the first three-quarters of the story is wasted. Perhaps the novel version, if MacLeod publishes one, will be more satisfactory.

Science fiction and fantasy are now the only genres in which writers can hope to sell novellas, or even publish collections of them. Stephen King's success with the form in horror only proves the point; perhaps only Stephen King and one or two other authors outside the sf field could have a success with a collection such as *Different Seasons*. For this reason, we must all hope that the sf magazines and original fiction anthologies keep going, especially collections as refreshing and successful as Peter Crowther's.

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**Note:** The above piece was originally delivered as a talk to the Nova Mob, 2nd October 2002. The Nova Mob is a monthly sf discussion group in Melbourne, Australia. Begun in 1970 by John Foyster, it has continued, with only a few interruptions, since then. Currently it is usually held at the home of Lucy Sussex (writer and critic) and Julian Warner (most recent Down-Under Fan-Fund winner).



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## REVIEWED

## Turning Back the Watch

Matt Hills

**Night Watch** (Doubleday, £17.99) is another of Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels, continuing the City Watch sequence that began with *Guards! Guards!* in 1989. Fourteen years on, we find Pratchett, not unrealistically concerned with the passing of time in Ankh-Morpork. Or with the making and breaking of time, because this is a time-travel novel of sorts.

Given the accretion of detail, history and continuity that by now characterizes the differently parodic lands of the Discworld, it must be as much of a challenge for Pratchett to find new stories to tell about his creation, as it is for him to find new real-life events, beliefs, genres and popular fictions to pastiche. While immersed in this addition to the Discworld "phenomenon," I was struck by the fact that Pratchett doesn't use time travel as an excuse for endless gags. Sure, we get a group of monks who patrol time, including a technical whiz called Qu (gettiti!). And Sam Vimes gets caught in a time loop to healthy, comic effect. But time and time again, it seemed to me that Pratchett was pulling his punches, or his punchlines, and holding back from making *Night Watch* a full-scale assault on the conventions of the time-travel narrative. Instead, it becomes a gentle sortie onto the terrain of *alt.history* cliché, and an affectionate look into Ankh-Morpork times past.

Although this remains a wry, funny story, why are there relatively few potshots taken at the paradoxes and problems of time travel? Cut-Me-Own-Throat Dibbler's name is coined via one time paradox, and Sam Vimes assuming the identity of John Keel offers another, but there is a far wider scope for playing with time-travel ideas that Pratchett perhaps fights

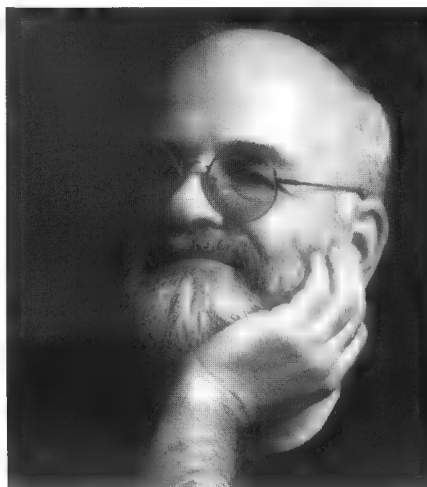
shy of here. On this occasion, time travel serves a specific function: that of having the elder and wiser ducal Sam Vimes meet, train, and inspire his younger self, Lance-Constable Vimes. And relatedly, it allows Pratchett to revisit the early days of his Ankh-Morpork creations, so that the Watch is in a state of primitive chaos, while Vetinari, yet to become Patriarch, is almost invisibly pursuing power. Time travel is less the focus for Pratchettian comic riffs, in other words, and more a device through which Discworld history and continuity can be reopened, investigated anew, and left differently familiar at the novel's close. The game here is to indulge readers' fan knowledge of Ankh-Morpork – look, that character is Dog-botherer Vetinari, and see what he's up to! – while adding in new historical detail and new wrinkles.

And at the heart of it all is Samuel Vimes, a character described by Edward James in *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature* (2000) as the City

Watch's "Everyman" figure (p113). This version of Vimes, awaiting the birth of his child, is a powerful, middle-aged man who is almost able to settle into the good fortune that life has bestowed upon him. Almost. Vimes laments the lost authenticity of his roots; the past when he would be on duty in the streets of Ankh-Morpork rather than caught up in pomp and ceremony. And of course, via a time-travel twist, Vimes the elder gets his wish, returning to the primal scene of his own origins as a Watchman. Much of the novel's entertainment stems from discussions had between Vimes the elder and Sam the younger, as two moments of a single character, near-archetypes of youth and wisdom, interact with one another. We do not really get access to the younger Vimes's viewpoint here, but the older version criticizes his own earlier youthful naïveté, being rather dismayed by Sam's hero worship, and irritated by his lack of experience and under-developed political good sense.

The latter version of Vimes isn't quite Everyman after all. He's Every-Experienced-In-His-Prime-No-Really!-Knows-How-The-World-Works-Man, able to deal pragmatically and improvisationally with whatever challenges come his way. He has a family that he desperately wants to be reunited with, and a History that he hopes to see restored to reality. Politics, Pratchett appears to be hinting, needs its "Great Men" when the chips are down and the barricades are up. Although wider forces (and monks) manipulate Vimes, and he is caught up in the greater sweep of events, it remains significant that he is able to make a difference to History only at a certain stage in his life, where his physical, mental and symbolic powers are most evenly matched, and where he is battle-seasoned, as it were. Vimes-the-elder is a safe pair of hands, a totemic instance of realistic, sensible politics rather than idealism or machination. Perhaps politics shouldn't be the province of the young and the inexperienced, this novel suggests, given that it falls instead to old pros like Madam Mese-role and Sam Vimes to safeguard due process and change in Ankh-Morpork.

The idea of working out an author's politics via his narratives and characters is at best a murky one, and Edward James has already issued a helpful caution to this effect: "The City Watch novels are the most political of Pratchett's works, although Pratchett's own political views do not necessarily emerge very clearly." (p119) With this warning note firmly in place, James then goes on to characterize Pratchett's fantasy as darkly democratic in tone: "if the City Watch novels offer a much more democratic



vision of Fantasyland than is normal, they do not offer a particularly optimistic view of democracy, or of human nature." (p121)

Does *Night Watch* bear this conclusion out? Well, it has its share of malicious, mad and misguided characters, and democracy seems not yet to be functioning in primal Ankh-Morpork. Pratchett's favoured targets for repeated lampooning are large-scale political systems of revolutionary belief. Reg Shoe the Zombie, for instance, is given to exclamations of communist thought, and one outburst to the effect that The People must seize the means of production is gently mocked (p262). Revolutionaries like Reg do not represent The People of the Discworld: they never can and never will. "The People" is a convenient fiction used to prop up pursuits of power in the name of idealism, since what The People want is not what revolutionaries like Reg want:

"People on the side of The People always ended up disappointed, in any case. They found that The People tended not to be grateful or appreciative or forward-thinking or obedient. The people tended to be small-minded and conservative and not very clever and were even distrustful of cleverness. And so the children of the revolution were faced with the age-old problem: it wasn't that you had the wrong kind of government, but the wrong kind of people." (p225-226)

Whether or not democracy is thought to be achievable, Pratchett's emphasis falls on a type of meritocracy (where great leaders really can be great) and on political pragmatism, where rules are bent with the best of intentions. But these beliefs are themselves not free of paradoxes or contradictions, as for example when Vimes's pragmatism leads him to behave in a questionable and violent way. Seeking to explain his actions to the idealist younger Sam, Vimes is forced to concede that, ultimately, even very principled people may make different rules for their own conduct. Vimes ponders how he can justify his occasional violence, and concludes: "the answer is, It's Me Doing It. I'll grant that is not a good answer... but that's what it boils down to." (p282)

Even pragmatism can never be perfectly pragmatic, or so this bleak joke suggests. And Vimes also realizes that his answer – it's acceptable just because It's Me Doing It – is shared by criminals, for whom self-preservation and self-justification are the order of the day. This puts Vimes temporarily on the same level as the thief and thug, Carcer, whom he has fallen into the past with.

By sending Vimes back in time with a nemesis figure, Pratchett gestures in

the direction of action-adventure corn. Carcer's presence means that there is somebody out and about in Ankh-Morpork who knows Vimes isn't really John Keel, and it also means, importantly, that Vimes isn't the only character with foreknowledge of how History should turn out. Carcer's seeming subplot is therefore essential to ratcheting up the book's suspense, as well as providing a personalized focus for Vimes's struggle to restore the "correct" version of historical events. Carcer falls in with primitive Ankh-Morpork's secret police, The Unmentionables, colourfully making the point that certain types of "law-keeping" are no more than thuggery. And a major part of Vimes's reforming zeal then becomes focused on putting together a police force, a Watch, worthy of the name. Vimes and Carcer may think alike *in extremis*, but in their belief systems otherwise, they are poles apart.

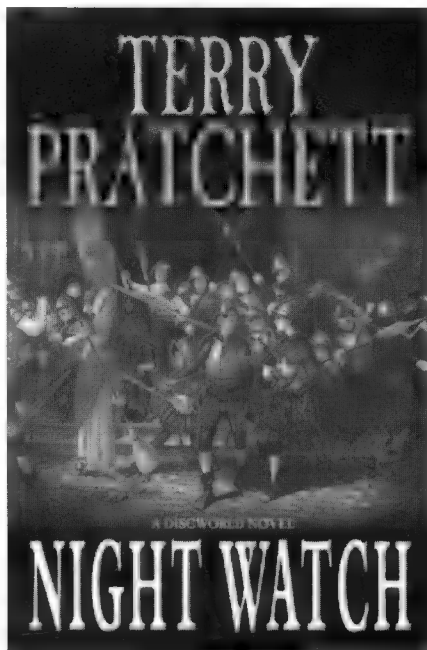
It is the political realities of social upheaval and Revolution that exercise Pratchett most in this novel. Time travel and the policing of time are generic props meant to get us to the crux of the matter: how do Revolutions happen, and how can this process be comedically exaggerated and depicted? Much of the funniest material comes when the barricades are peopled towards the end of *Night Watch*, and when it becomes a matter of some debate who is actually in front of the barricades, and who is behind them, as well as which group constitutes The City or The Majority. Grandmothers are posted on the barricades to berate their soldier grandsons, and Ankh-Morpork's trade routes begin to cause trouble, with deliveries of eggs getting somewhat in the way of armed struggle. All human farce is here, thrown together in a

bravura rendition of tragicomedy. The possible overthrow of a regime may not seem rich in comic potential, whereas time travel and the Historical Imperative strike me as being easier to mine for absurdist effects and extrapolations.

It is considerably to Pratchett's credit that he plays the time-travel card with a light touch, while focusing his parodic and dramatic energies elsewhere. Because trite though it seems to say it, Ankh-Morpork really is as much a character here as are Vimes, Carcer *et al.* Focusing on the practicalities of the city, and even offering a lengthy list of its street coverings and materials such as "the eighty-seven types of paving brick" (p94), Pratchett's grasp of his creation is as detailed and demotic as ever. It is the city's geography that becomes vital to how the siege develops, and it is the city that pervades Vimes's thoughts. "Ankh-Morpork: The Prequel" also delights in foreshadowing events, especially Vetinari's rise to the top, and a number of scenes ask to be read in the broader context of earlier Ankh-Morporkian novels and later Ankh-Morporkian events. Given its shadowy figures manipulating events towards a conclusion we are already aware of, it's tempting to see this book as the Pratchettian equivalent of *The Phantom Menace* etc., except that this is a clever and engrossing tale possessing shade and subtlety. Not such a useful comparison, then.

Pratchett's obvious authorial affinity with the viewpoint of the older Vimes, who has all the trappings of success, may indicate that both author and character have moved on a great deal since *Guards! Guards!*. This should hardly surprise us. But the strength of the Discworld, or of Ankh-Morpork specifically, is that it can incorporate revisionism and different viewpoints, undergo a Revolution, even, and still remain strangely and delightfully familiar, if not familial. For Pratchett leaves his readers dangling at the beginning of another chapter for Sam Vimes: having dealt with his younger self, he might now have to deal with a Sam junior. In short, the experience of time travel prepares Vimes for the duties and responsibilities of fatherhood, and for the growing and changing of generations. *Night Watch* pretends to ignore the Grandfather Paradox, but it slyly positions time travel and Revolution as paternal rites of passage for Old Father Vimes. Underlining how central the family plot can be to narratives of time travel, this might well be Pratchett-the-elder's sharpest use yet of the fantasy genre's bag of tricks.

Matt Hills





Time travel has been one of the pillars of science fiction since H. G. Wells. Over 100 years since his *Time Traveller* first pushed that lever forward into futurity, the subject still continues to provide fertile ground for the imaginative sf writer.

Kage Baker is one such writer. Since her career began, she has produced a number well-received tales about a secretive Time Travelling organisation known as "the Company," or Dr Zeus Inc. As well as publishing these short stories, Baker has written, so far, four novels about the Company: *In the Garden of Eden* (1997), *Sky Coyote* (1999), *Mendoza in Hollywood* (2000) and *The Graveyard Game* (2001).

Now we have ***Black Projects, White Knights: The Company Dossiers*** by Kage Baker (Golden Gryphon Press, \$24.95) which conveniently collects many of the Company short stories together in one volume. Fourteen stories are presented in this handsome edition. Eleven of them first saw print in *Asimov's SF*; three are new. There's also an introduction, in story form, but it serves merely to preview the characters in the book. A brief spotlight is shone on each one: much is left unsaid. The stories themselves are divided between two types: the first concerns the childhood and adolescence of an unusual boy, Alec Checkerfield, the second relates various incidents and adventures concerning the Company's operatives.

The four Alec Checkerfield stories are presented in narrative order, although they are scattered throughout the book. They are "Smart Alec," "The Dust Enclosed Here," "Monster Story" and "The Likely Lad." This last story is set in Bournemouth – a pleasant surprise for us Brits from that part of the world – and also features such Dorset delights as Sandbanks and Poole Bay. All of these stories have appeared in *Asimov's SF* before, and taken together they create a sympathetic portrait of this boy as he's confronted by the peculiar challenges of his society. Despite his lineage (he's the son of the sixth earl of Finsbury), his wealth (he lives in a mansion, looked after by his butler and cook) and his power (he's part of the ruling elite), his mysterious origins expose him to constant danger as he grows up. We are tantalized by hints that Alec is different from other boys; he soon begins to display superhuman abilities. Yet the stories rise far above that of the mundane superhuman tale, because the author provides our hero with a worthy opponent: the future society in which he lives.

Checkerfield's world is a sinister extrapolation of current political trends, and the kicker is that it's set in England (sometime in the near

## From Baja to Bournemouth

Nigel Brown

future). Baker is a Californian, and from her West Coast watchtower she has painted a future for the UK worthy of the most manic rantings from *The Spectator* magazine, or that of any barmy Tory Knight-of-the-Shire. She has looked at the European Union's ever more intrusive directives, and the Political Correctness gone mad that has infused both central and local government in the UK, and has predicted a nightmare Orwellian world of technological control and "thought-crime." Nothing original per-

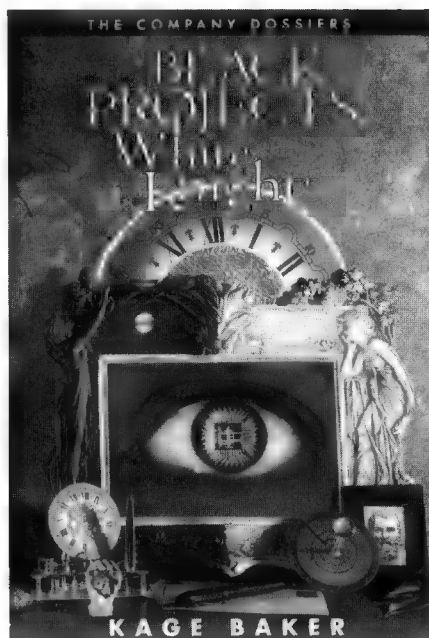
haps, but it's done creditably. Baker's stories take us into the delicious paradox of being in sympathy with our Hero, cheering him on, even though Alec Checkerfield may not be human at all.

The majority of the tales in this book, however, concern the Company's operatives. These are humans augmented into superhuman cyborgs, whose points of origin span history – and pre-history. They follow the Company's directives in preserving artefacts, researching lost historical information, and salvaging treasures from the past.

If all this sounds like Poul Anderson's "Time Patrol" series, it bears only a superficial resemblance to that classic work; Baker chooses to throw her literary eye on other aspects of time custodianship. Unlike Anderson's *Time Patrol*, the Company seems not too concerned about preserving the sanctity of recorded time, and preventing the creation of alternate worlds. Baker's organization is altogether a more post-1950s institution than a *Time Patrol* driven by high morals and ethics. Based in the 24th century, Dr Zeus Inc. undertakes commercial exploitation of the past: for example, by sending its agents out in search of rare, extinct plants. It even commissions famous writers from history to come up with new plot treatments for movies! As with the Alec Checkerfield stories, the background to the Company is only partially revealed, piecemeal, so it can be a trifle difficult for the reader to find a sure foothold. As a tip, I'd recommend the story "Old Flat Top," written for this book, as one which particularly delivers sufficient background information to satisfy the mystified reader.

The operatives themselves are a bunch of immortals, to whom being cut into pieces is only an inconvenience until the Company puts them back together. The tension in these stories therefore relies on their encounters with ordinary people in the past. Baker is adept at making us care about these folk; her sharp observations of character create some very touching moments. A lot of these stories are set in her native Baja California and she writes about this environment with authority, presenting a vivid, entrancing landscape, but the real delights are found in her portrayal of character. I was reminded of Damon Knight's phrase "pleasures like beads on a string."

One of the most powerful stories, however, takes a different turn: "Hanuman" features an enhanced *Australopithecus afarensis* and tells of his encounter with a colony of chimpanzees that communicate through sign-language. This mix-and-match game that draws parallels between



primates (including *Homo sapiens*) makes for a thoughtful read.

But the stories do leave certain questions unexplored about free will and the rights of individuals. How much are the Company's operatives "owned" by the Company? Have they sold their human souls for cyborg

immortality? And how much choice do they have in carrying out their duties? The last tale, a new story, "The Hotel at Harlan's Landing," does imply that there's a rebellion brewing, but we'll have to wait for future stories to get our answers. *Black Projects, White Knights* doesn't tell us the complete

story of the Company, but perhaps a hint can be found in its title...

And where do the Alec Checkerfield stories fit in? The book's introduction gives a clue. I think I've figured it out, but I won't divulge it here. Answers on a postcard, please.

**Nigel Brown**

**In House of Chains: A Tale of the Malazan Book of the Fallen** (Bantam Press, £18.99 hc; £12.99 tpb) Canadian author Steven Erikson further twines his twin tales of Genabackis and the Seven Cities together, weaving the mythopoeic threads of his previous novels into a sprawling saga that shows no signs of let-up in epic proportions, nor exhaustion of the author's fertile imagination. Like the archaeologist that he is, Erikson continues to delve into the history and ruins of the Malazan Empire, in the process revealing unforeseen riches and annals that defy expectations, leaving the reader overwhelmed by the sheer scope of the author's vivid invention. Erikson has taken the inheritance of Tolkien and Donaldson and expanded it into realms those authors, let alone their many imitators, never dreamt of, raising the bar for epic fantasy to new heights unlikely to be equalled anytime soon.

Occurring shortly before events related in *Deadhouse Gates* and *Memories of Ice*, *House of Chains* starts out by introducing a new character who promises to have a momentous role, not only for the current novel, but for "past" and future books as well. The Teblor are a dying race of warriors living in the remote fastness of the Laederon Plateau, amidst the mountains that divide the tundra from the rest of northwest Genabackis. Their origins are lost in time, their numbers declining steadily through continual clan warfare. Theirs is a harsh society, where strength of arms is all that is valued, children are ritually sacrificed to the Teblor's seven gods – "the Faces in the Rock" – and where coup is counted and displayed by trinkets of amputated ears and digits. For years the Teblor have warred only amongst themselves, but Karsa Orlong dreams of past glories, when his grandfather journeyed south, beyond the mountains, to slaughter defenceless "children." He seeks a return to the old ways, where a warrior's stature is measured by personal body count, seeing himself as the leader of a unified Teblor nation. He hears the voices of his gods whispering murderous urgings in his ears, and though the elders of his village forbid his expedition, he sets off with two companions for the borders of their land, along the way leaving a trail of carnage and savagery in his wake. However, while

## Slaughtering Children

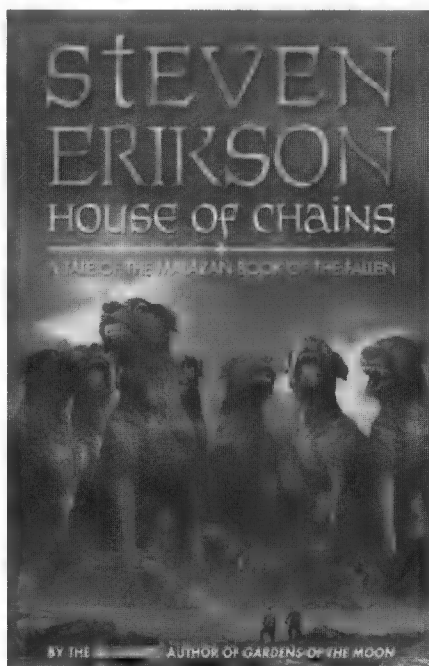
*William Thompson*

glory is momentarily attained, it comes at the expense of the deaths of his two companions, as well as his imprisonment and enslavement by the "children" he sought to slaughter, the human inhabitants of Genabackis, backed by troops of the Malazan

Empire. More ominous, though, for his own future as well as the world's, is his growing suspicion that his identity, and that of his people and the gods they worship, are not all they appear. And this identity will pose some surprises for the reader as well.

Meanwhile, the story shifts forward to the aftermath of *Deadhouse Gates* and the destruction of Coltaine's army. The Empress Laseen has sent her Adjunct, Tavore, to the Seven Cities to put down Sha'ik's Rebellion and destroy the Whirlwind Goddess. Tavore has cobbled together a new legion formed of raw recruits and those few that survived the Chain of Dogs. Untested, and demoralized by all that has gone before, they will march back along Coltaine's desolate route, forced to witness, mile by barren mile, the grisly reminder of his failed, heroic retreat. Unknown to Tavore, her sister waits for her in the holy wastes of Raraku, worshipped as Sha'ik Reborn and guarded by the Whirlwind and the desert Army of the Apocalypse. She looks toward vengeance for her sister's betrayal, luring Tavore and her army to the focus of her power. But there are other players that conspire in this oncoming struggle for their own ends. Sha'ik's own army is riven with intrigue and dissension. The High Mages plot against each other, while the traitor Korbolo Dom seeks to place himself upon the Malazan throne. Her closest allies, Heboric Ghost Hands, the Theloman Toblakai, and Leoman of the Flails, have become estranged, both from Sha'ik and each other. Various Gods and Ascendants attempt to manipulate events through furtive participants, human and otherwise, recruiting some old and familiar faces. Forces are building toward a convergence upon the dead sea ruins of Raraku, and behind it all, walking in and out of present-day history, stalk the T'lann Imass and spectres even older.

Too vast in conception and rich in narrative multiplicity to be adequately reduced to a mere few paragraphs of synopsis, what little has been offered is more likely misleading than informative, at least for those unfamiliar with the author's writing, and inaccurately suggestive, perhaps, of the early work of Glen Cook, David Gemmell or the recent novels of James Barclay, if a bit more grand in presentation. However, as an author,





Erikson demands far more from the reader, in memory if nothing else. Though this is put forward as a separate novel within a related and ongoing series, the complexity of the author's ever-evolving world, and the diversity of storylines, will defy anyone unfamiliar with the writer's past work, and thus, while each book can be viewed as a stand-alone, an individual chapter in which Erikson has wisely eschewed interminable conclusions, yet each novel is a segue into the next, a protean glimpse into an ever-expanding narrative universe.

Further, storylines between books, as well as within, shift in timeline as well as between a large and often revolving cast of characters. Nor is the author, unlike so many of his contemporaries, one to lead the reader by the narrative nose, often relying upon suggestion and his audience's presumed attention. As in previous instalments, the tone here is unrelentingly grim, at times brutal, and characters fall irrespective of their relative roles within the novel, or the narrative's (and likely the reader's) attachment to them. Nonetheless, one senses a hidden thread of redemption running throughout the novels, in the various choices characters make when faced with adversity, chaos or a world indifferent to their fate. It may exist in nothing more noticeable than the personality or values of an individual character, or their resistance to the roles forced upon them by circumstance, or a defiant embrace of belief against all odds and contrary evidence. No one goes down quietly in an Erikson novel, despite the many that fail, and I suspect the author is a firm believer in boxing's conflation of Tennyson: "Better to have stepped into the ring and lost than to never to have entered at all."

Backing away somewhat from the dense degree of metaphor and symbolism that defined *Memories of Ice*, in *House of Chains*, as its title implies, Erikson concentrates instead upon a single, predominant symbol. References to shackles abound throughout the novel, associated with the new House that has entered the author's metaphysical and metaphoric deck, as well as the Crippled God that rules this new, and in some quarters unwelcome, addition to the Azath pantheon. Though obvious, Erikson uses this symbol to explore the bonds that bind us: to each other, to the dead, to our histories and our varying beliefs and faiths.

On the surface, such connections seem apparent, yet the author is weaving a greater skein of relationship that informs not only this novel, but is tied to earlier events, as well as his growing cosmology and novels to come. Some links are sundered, others only starting to appear, and as always

Erikson delights in dropping crumbs, some of which lead forward, others back. By now established within a landscape at once familiar yet original and exotic, featuring a geography that recalls Moorcock's multiverse, but where the past perpetually haunts the present, stretching back in history beyond remembrance or the rumour of recollection, perhaps even to where past and future pass each other towards destinations not yet visualized, this is true myth in the making, a drawing upon fantasy to recreate histories and legends as rich as any found within our culture.

A return to the spirit and vision of Homeric epic, where nations and cultures clash, gods stalk the earth meddling in the affairs of men, and religions are born and past civilizations decay and are eventually forgotten, Erikson's novels are a serious effort to recapture the essence of our earliest heroic literature, and of the mythography that informed and attempted to fashion a view of the world in which the fantastic represented but another aspect of life less reductive to quantification and the puzzle-games of reason. Nor is Erikson's writing a mere excuse for imitation, but instead an attempt to re-conceive myth, not only as a constant, but within a more contemporary context, regardless of any trappings of sword and sorcery. And when viewed as myth, when seen as working within a similar scale and intention that acknowledges the heart of its earliest expressions, these novels so far have surpassed anything that has preceded, at least within recent memory.

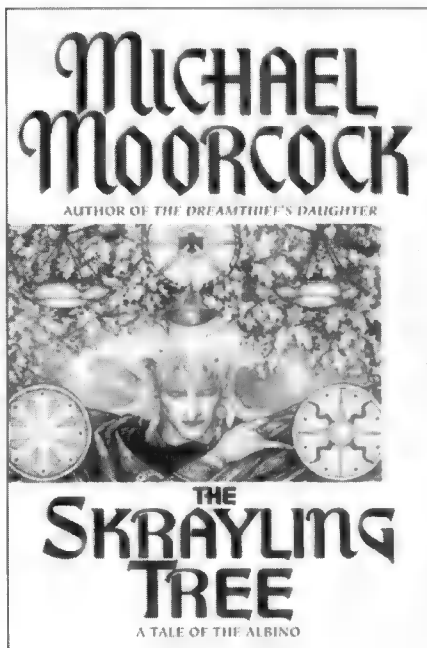
I hear that Dan Simmons seeks to recapture Homer in his forthcoming novel, *Illium*. While he may prove suc-

cessful, I would suggest the task has already been accomplished.

Another writer obsessed with myth-making is Michael Moorcock, though he's been at it much longer. *The Skrayling Tree* (Warner Aspect, \$24.95) is a return to his ongoing Elric saga, and a direct sequel to *The Dreamthief's Daughter*. Here Moorcock transfers his stage and actors across the Atlantic, in part, as one of his characters suggests, "to restore the myth and address the great Matter of America." Portentous indeed, but the author has been living some time now in Texas, long enough to assimilate America's illusory dreams. Yet Moorcock seems concerned with more than can be contained by mere borders, and the vision of this novel often transcends its setting's admittedly spacious boundaries.

Three stories or "branches" set within a larger, organic whole, meant to reflect the living, mythical tree of the title, itself an expression of the "multiverse" and its infinite possibilities, the tripartite division of the novel is symbolically reiterated elsewhere and must be viewed within a larger mythic context. In many respects, outside a temporally and dimensionally shifting, linear if parallel plot, aspects of the stories being told can be seen as mirrors, reflecting, as through successive images, the novel's ultimate goals. A shell game playing masks of God – characters as mummies, symbols transformed into a fictional reality – the reader is forced to dispense with conventional narrative logic, instead asked to see beyond the surface appearance of things to what, sometimes hidden, they represent. And while a return to a more ancient mode of storytelling, long before mimesis demanded copies of itself, and despite their familiar appearance, traditional symbols, myth and archetypes do not always conform to what is expected, continually recreating themselves.

As conventional plot, events in the opening chapters rush forward with apparent contrivance, seeming oversized and at times inexplicable. The dreamthief's daughter, Oona, and her husband, Count Ulric von Bek, are vacationing in a rural summer house on the coast of Nova Scotia. The area is rich in Indian and settler lore, and offshore lies an unpredictable current that at times forms a dangerous whirlpool, known variously in local legend as Auld Strom or Le Chaudron Noir. One day, looking out over the channel of small islands, Oona spots an old manor house she's never seen before, in appearance strikingly similar in design to architecture of the 11th century. Intrigued, she and Ulric paddle over to the island in a canoe.



The old house appears abandoned, but they spy a pale, furtive figure peering out at them through a window. Oona recognizes a distinct familiarity of features, almost as if looking at a younger version of her husband, and Ulric becomes alarmed at the inhabitant's appearance, urging their immediate departure. The young man chases them to the waterline, calling out "Father," but Ulric is determined to flee, and they are left wondering at the encounter.

Later that night, towards dawn, Ulric is abducted by ghostly Indians who, as Oona watches helplessly in dismay, paddle their canoes straight to the heart of Auld Strom, disappearing into the depths of the maelstrom. After a failed pursuit, merged with the body of a Lost Fishling of folklore, Fwulette the Salmon Wife, Oona finds herself defeated in her initial attempt to rescue her husband. The Indians, however, have left a huge medicine shield, apparently forgotten. Wondering what she will do next, Oona receives an unexpected visit from Johannes Klosterheim, the ex-Nazi formerly allied in *Dreamthief's Daughter* with Ulric's cousin and nemesis, Gaynor von Minct, and an admitted servant of Lucifer.

In search of the Holy Grail, he had hoped that Ulric might have been able to assist him. He also implies that he had known Ulric was in danger, but that he arrived too late. Klosterheim does, however, identify the shield as belonging to the Kakatanawa, a mysterious tribe long vanished from the region, and promises that it will be able to transport Oona to where they have taken her husband. Riding the shield, Oona descends into the maelstrom, only to be attacked by an air elemental and cast up on an unfamiliar, wooded shore. There another Indian awaits her, a sachem called Ayanawatta, also known as Hiawatha. He promises to reunite the couple, but warns they first must travel a great distance, as well as face dangers unknown, for the balance of the multiverse is being threatened, and "the road to Kakatanawa is a complicated one... It isn't possible to go there directly..."

All of this and more occurs within the first 30-odd pages. For the conventional novel, or the reader unfamiliar with Moorcock's previous work, this disparate mélange of references and events stretches the limits of credulity fairly thin. And frankly, I continue to have reservations about the

inclusion of Fwulette the Salmon Wife, as, best I can ascertain, it seems an indulgent and irrelevant reference to folklore. But Moorcock's seeming stew of allusions and characters bears symbolic relevance to what is to follow, just as his choice of a maelstrom as a conduit to alternate realities seems apt within the context of all that takes place in the first chapter.

Oona's branch of the story continues, becoming a mystical pilgrimage into the heart of America. After a long journey that incorporates a great degree of Native American folklore widely borrowed, as well as diverse creatures from prehistory, with their goal within sight, the novel shifts to the second section of the story: Elric. The Prince of Melniboné is returning from the Crusades, travelling across Dalmatia in search of a Norse pirate styling himself Earl Gunnar. Part of his *Dream of a Thousand Years*, Elric quests after the Nihrainian smith, Volnir, who forged the demon-blade Stormbringer, which Elric has lost in his own world. It is rumoured that Gunnar hopes to voyage to the World's Rim, where Elric believe Volnir will be found. Joining Gunnar's band of reivers and adventurers, they journey across the Atlantic to the mouth of Hel, entering Nifelheim, where they are dragged into the maelstrom, Hvergelmir. Miraculously sur-

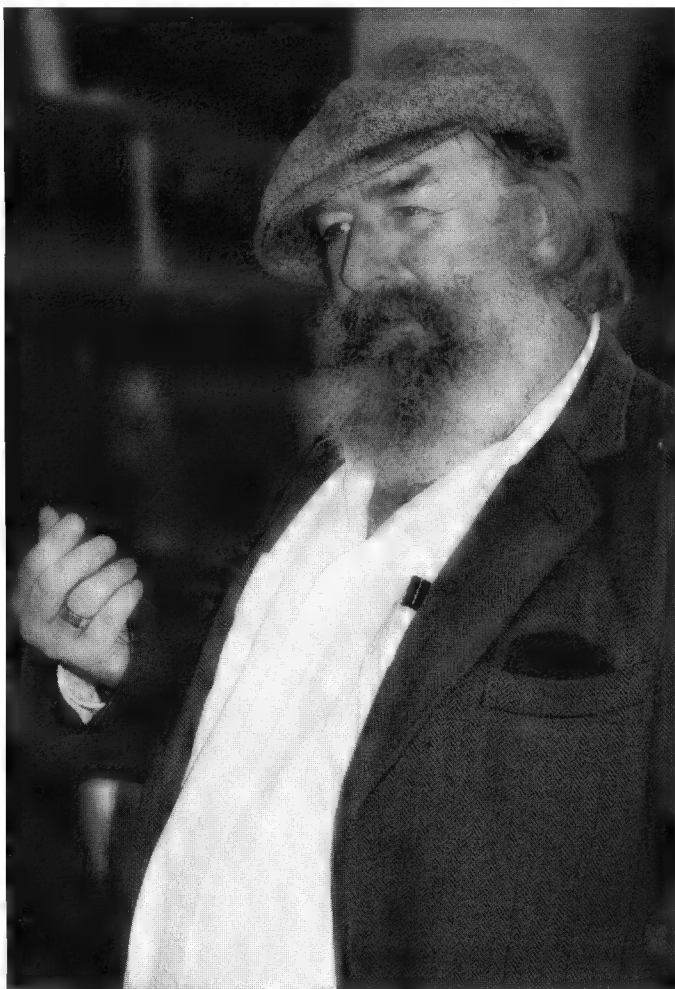
living the passage, they finally arrive at the lost continent of Vinland, known to the Greeks as Atlantis and to the Romans as Thule. There a man waits for them on an island in an old manor house: Johannes Klosterheim. Joining Klosterheim and his allies, a Native American tribe of pygmies, Elric will journey to Kakatanawa, along the way running into Prince Lobkowitz, Oona's mentor and Ulric's relative.

These stories eventually meet in Ulric's chapters, which occupy the last third of the novel. Enlisted against his will by the Nihrain to save the Cosmic Balance, Ulric travels with his old friend, Prince Lobkowitz (before the latter's encounter with Elric) on trans-dimensional steeds to the ziggurat city of Kakatanawa. There the forces of Chaos and Law converge, as well as the novel's various characters, to join in an apocalyptic battle to save or destroy the multiverse, both symbolized and immanent as the Skrayling Tree.

Preposterous, you say? In the hands of any other writer probably so. But Moorcock is working with large ideas here, and on an immense scale.

Attempting to create a new cosmology through symbolism and allegory, to reinvent myth while reinvesting it with both an old and new significance, drawing disparate traditions together in order to reveal what they all share beyond cultural identities, as well as commenting upon the conflicting dreams that inform America, Moorcock is tackling a huge task which only someone of his vision dare approach. Is it always successful? No. And certain sweeping historical observations made during the novel are bound to make scholars uncomfortable, even if at times they reflect a kernel of truth. And those looking for a conventional fantasy, in which plot and characters act as expected – character- or story-driven – or those unable to read fiction as figurative, will be disappointed, if not outright confounded. But when viewed as a renewal of myth recast through imagination, where past and present merge to reveal new spiritual and cosmological perspectives on the world – heritage as well as inheritance – it becomes quite an achievement, both in ambition and invention, offering, if you will, a symbolic path opening into our own dreams and mythologizing. And, as Moorcock suggests, symbols can become reality.

William Thompson



Photograph: Paul Brazier



# BOOKS RECEIVED



JANUARY  
2003

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anderson, Poul. **For Love and Glory**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87449-9, 300pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; this, probably Anderson's last novel [he died in July 2001], is ■ considerably revised expansion of two short stories he contributed to the Isaac's Universe series of anthologies in the early 1990s; it concerns alien encounters on a far planet.) *March 2003*.

Asaro, Catherine. **The Moon's Shadow**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30425-2, 478pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the eighth in this Nebula Award-winning scientist-author's "Saga of the Skolian Empire" series, it's described, as was the her last, *Spherical Harmonic* [2001], as "a unique blend of hard science fiction and heartrending romance.") *March 2003*.

Asher, Neal. **The Line of Polity**. Tor (UK), ISBN 0-333-90365-X, 547pp, C-format paperback, £10.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a third fat sf adventure by the rising author of the previous Macmillan-published novels, *Gridlinked* [2001] and *The Skinner* [2002]; just to confuse us all, Macmillan have decided to rename their sf/fantasy list "Tor" – after the

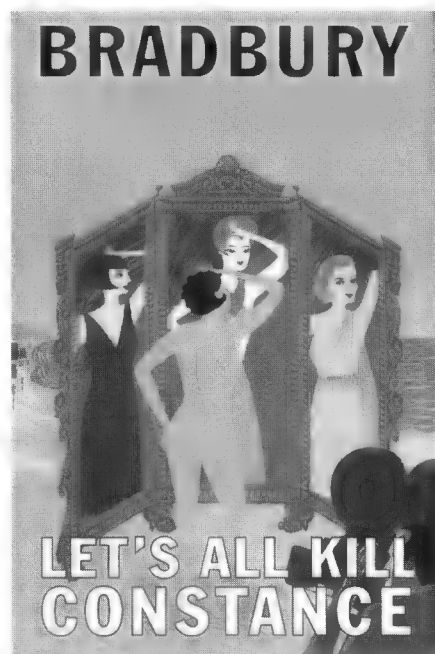
American publishing house of the same name; however, it should be noted that the two lists, American and British, are not identical, and are editorially separate.) *21st March 2003*.

Aylett, Steve. **The Velocity Gospel**. "Accomplice Book 2." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07394-2, 131pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; another slim [but dense] piece of freaky lit – or "bizarre pulp," as *The Scotsman's* reviewer called an earlier book – from Aylett, an author who, according to the *Guardian*, is "distressingly brilliant.") *January 2003*.

Baxendale, Trevor. **Fear of the Dark**. "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53865-1, 275pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Fifth Doctor, Nyssa and Tegan.) *6th January 2003*.

Bishop, David. **The Domino Effect**. "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53869-4, 278pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor, this one is set in ■ alternate present in which "the British Empire is flourishing, terrorism is rife, and, strangest of all, the computer hasn't been invented.") *3rd February 2003*.

Bradbury, Ray. **Let's All Kill Constance**. Morrow, ISBN 0-06-051584-8, 210pp, hardcover, cover by José Luis Merino, \$23.95. (Mainstream crime novel, first edition; a Hollywood-set, humorous crime novel, in ■ similar vein to the author's previous mystery, *A Graveyard for Lunatics* [1990]; the fantasy content may be slight, or non-existent, but who cares? – Bradbury continues his great old-age spurt of creativity with this, his second new book in nine months [the collection *One More for the Road* came out in April 2002]; as we've already said, it's good to see Bradbury carrying on, well into his 80s.) *2nd January 2003*.



Brown, Eric, and Ken MacLeod. **A Writer's Life/The Human Front**. "Binary 5." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07505-8, 107+90pp, A-format paperback, covers by Jim Burns, £5.99. (Two sf novellas, arranged dos-à-dos, first edition in this format; this is half of the anthology *Infinites*, edited by Peter Crowther [Gollancz, May 2002], whose individual novellas, Brown's *A Writer's Life* and MacLeod's *The Human Front*, were first published as slim volumes by the small-press PS Publishing in 2001.) *13th February 2003*.

Bujold, Lois McMaster. **The Curse of Chalion**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-713361-8, 490pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; multiple Hugo-winner Bujold takes a break from her usual space-opera sf to produce a fantasy of the Big Commercial sort – "rich in atmosphere, magic, character, and romance.") *3rd February 2003*.

Burroughs, Edgar Rice. **Pellucidar**. Illustrated by J. Allen St John. Introduction by Jack McDevitt. Afterword by Phillip R. Burger. "Bison Frontiers of Imagination." Bison Books [University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE 68588-0255, USA], ISBN 0-8032-6204-3, xv+167pp, trade paperback, cover by Thomas Floyd, £10.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1923; this is the American edition of 2002 with ■ UK price and publication date added; distributed in the UK by Combined Academic Publishers Ltd, 15a Lewin's Yard, East St., Chesham, Bucks. HP5 1HQ; a sequel to *At the Earth's Core* [1922; reissued by Bison Books in 2000], it was first serialized in the pulp magazine *All-Story Weekly*, 1st-29th May 1915; as usual, Burger's afterword is well-informed, and interesting [and McDevitt's introduction is ■ pleasant piece of puffery]; these attractively-produced Bison Books reprints of early sf are a collectable series, complementing the Millennium "SF Masterworks" and other recent reprint series by making available older material.) *30th January 2003*.

Campbell, John W., Jr. **A New Dawn: The Complete Don A. Stuart Stories**. Edited by James A. Mann. Introduction by Barry N. Malzberg. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701, USA], ISBN 1-886778-15-9, 462pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, \$26. (Sf collection, first edition; it contains 16 stories from the 1930s – all those that *Astounding* editor Campbell [1910-1971] published under his then-celebrated pseudonym of "Don A. Stuart" – plus two short essays; Malzberg's nine-page introduction makes a vivid case for Campbell's historical importance in the American sf field; another very worthy NESFA collection.) *January 2003*.

Carroll, Jonathan. **White Apples**. Tor (UK), ISBN 0-333-98983-X, 259pp, C-format paperback, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2002; proof copy received; "a captivating

and constantly surprising tale of life, death, and the realm between.") 4th April 2003.

Clute, John. **Appleseed**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30379-5, 337pp, trade paperback, cover by Shelley Eshkar, \$14.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2001; the famous critic's second novel, after a more-than-20-year gap, and his first sf novel – an out-and-out space opera; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 166.) 17th February 2003.

Cobley, Michael. **Shadowgod: Book Two of the Shadowkings Trilogy**. Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-6114-2, 470pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a second novel by this Leicester-born, Glasgow-resident writer; his first, *Shadowkings* [2001], was reviewed by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 173.) 3rd February 2003.

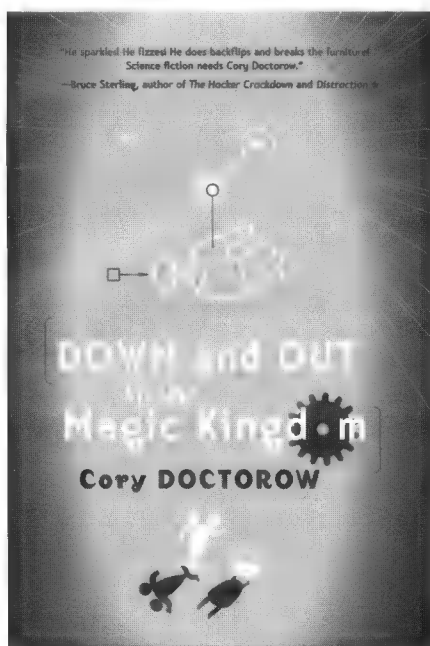
Constantine, Storm. **The Way of Light**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87367-0, 493pp, trade paperback, cover by Doug Beekman, \$17.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; follow-up to *Sea Dragon Heir* [1999] and *The Crown of Silence* [2000] in the "Chronicles of Magravandias" trilogy.) 11th January 2003.

Dillard, J. M. **Nemesis**. "Star Trek." Pocket, ISBN 0-7434-5772-2, xxiv+227pp, hardcover, £12.99. (Sf movie novelization, first published in the USA, 2002; it's illustrated with eight pages of colour stills from the film, and there are also black-and-white photos in the end-matter; this may or may not be the American first edition of December 2002 with a British price added [the book's provenance is unclear: it is printed in Britain]; based on a screenplay by John Logan for the recent "Star Trek" movie directed by Stuart Baird, it has a fairly lengthy introduction by the screenwriter, which is unusual for this kind of book; there's also an afterword by the film's "production publicist," Michael Klastorin; "J. M. Dillard" is a pseudonym of Jeanne M. Kalogridis.) "Out now," says the accompanying publicity sheet, which is a fat lot of use; presumably this is a UK publication of January 2003.

Egan, Greg. **Schild's Ladder**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07391-8, 327pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2002; space-based hard sf as only Egan can do it, about "a struggle to understand a new galaxy that threatens to engulf our own"; reviewed by Nigel Brown in *Interzone* 180.) 13th February 2003.

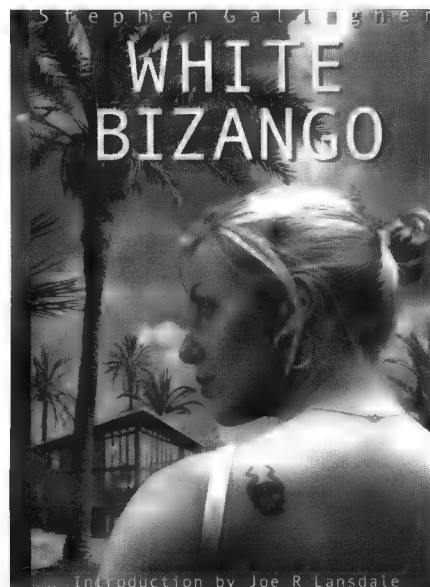
Elliott, Kate. **The Gathering Storm: Volume Five of Crown of Stars**. DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0119-4, xvii+903pp, hardcover, cover by Jody A. Lee, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "Kate Elliott" [or Katrina Elliott, as it says in the copyright statement] is a pseudonym of Alis A. Ras-mussen, who now lives in Hawaii; this is "DAW Book Collectors No. 1246.") February 2003.

March 2003



Farrell, S. L. **Holder of Lightning: The Cloud-images #1**. DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0130-5, xi+494pp, hardcover, cover by Gordon Crabb, \$23.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "S. L. Farrell" is a pseudonym of Stephen Leigh; the first of a Celtic, Irish-flavoured "epic, multigenerational series," this is "DAW Book Collectors No. 1243.") January 2003.

Gallagher, Stephen. **White Bizango**. Introduction by Joe R. Lansdale. PS Publishing [Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave., Harrogate, N. Yorks. HG2 9BQ], ISBN 1-902880-50-1, 159pp, small-press trade paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £8. (Horror/crime novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £25 [not seen]; it's a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 400 numbered hardcover copies; more of a "short novel" than a "novella," this is Gallagher's first new book-length work of fiction since the mid-1990s; it's set in



Louisiana and involves cops-versus-voodoo.) Dated "December 2002," but received in January 2003.

Grimwood, Jon Courtenay. **Effendi: The Second Arabesk**. Pocket, 0-671-77369-0, 376pp, B-format paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £6.99. (Alternate-history sf novel, first published in the UK, 2002; a follow-up to *Pashazade*, in the "Arabesk" trilogy, set in a timeline where Germany won the First World War and where the Middle East is still dominated by the Ottoman Empire.) 2nd February 2003.

Halkon, Lauren. **Night Seekers**. Cosmos Books [PO Box 301, Holicong, PA 18928-0301, USA], ISBN 1-58715-394-7, 179pp, trade paperback, cover by the author, \$14.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut book by a British-born writer, it's about "three races, two existing in the dreams of the third"; to order, see the website: [www.cosmos-books.com](http://www.cosmos-books.com); Cosmos Books is an imprint of Wild-side Press, a US print-on-demand publisher.) Late entry: 2002 publication, received in January 2003.

Heinlein, Robert A. **Podkayne of Mars**. Hale, ISBN 0-7090-7139-6, 204pp, hardcover, cover by Michael Thomas, £17.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1963; this one was not originally published as a "juvenile," but of course it is – it's Heinlein's "girls' book," about the adventures of 15-year-old heroine Poddy in space.) 31st January 2003.

Lee, Tanith. **Black Unicorn**. Illustrated by Heather Cooper. ibooks, ISBN 0-7434-4512-0, 138pp, trade paperback, cover by Cooper, £7.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991; this is the American edition of December 2002 with a British price and publication date added; it's co-copyrighted "Byron Preiss Visual Publications, Inc.," see the publishers' website, [www.ibooksinc.com](http://www.ibooksinc.com), for further details.) January 2003.

Le Guin, Ursula K. **The Birthday of the World**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07479-5, xiii+362pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 2002; the front cover adds the phrase "and Other Stories" to the title, but that's not stated on the title page; it contains an author's foreword plus eight solid stories mostly set in Le Guin's famous "Hainish" or "Ekumen" universe; one novella-length tale, "Paradises Lost," is original to this volume; recommended.) 16th January 2003.

Leith, Valery. **The Way of the Rose**. "Everien: Book Three." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07303-9, viii+452pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; conclusion of a trilogy; "Valery Leith" is a pseudonym of the American-born but British-resident sf writer Tricia Sullivan.) January 2003.

Levy, Roger. **Dark Heavens**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07245-8, 389pp, C-format paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £10.99. (Sf novel, first edition;



there is ■ simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen] priced at £17.99; this is a second novel from the British author of *Reckless Sleep* [2000] – to which the new book seems to be a sequel.) 20th February 2003.

Lovegrove, James. **Untied Kingdom**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07385-3, 404pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; there will be a simultaneous C-format paperback edition priced at £10.99 [not seen]; this is set in a near-future Britain which has become “untied” as ■ result of “falling foul of the International Community”; apparently inspired by the spectacle of the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, it seems to project the UK into ■ ex-Yugoslavia type of scenario – which, as ■ result of the slow gestation of novels and the sluggishness of the publishing industry, perhaps demonstrates that sf writers are doomed to fight the-war-before-last.) 17th April 2003.

McKillop, Patricia A. **Ombria in Shadow**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-01016-4, 298pp, small trade paperback, cover by Kinuko Y. Craft, \$14. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2002; like World Fantasy Award-winner McKillop's other recent titles, it's in Ace Books' attractive small format.) 4th February 2003.

Marco, John. **The Eyes of God**. “The enthralling new fantasy from the author of *Tyrants and Kings*.” Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07392-6, 789pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2002; the beginning of a series of Big Commercial Fantasies by this DAW Books author.) 13th February 2003.

Marillier, Juliet. **Wolfskin**. Tor Macmillan, ISBN 1-4050-0038-4, 566pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 2002; proof copy received; Australian fantasist Marillier continues her exploration of the British Isles' past in this, the opening volume of ■ trilogy which features Norsemen in Orkney: “Introducing the Tor superlead launch title – one of the brightest new stars in historical fantasy... the first in ■ brilliant new epic sequence.”) 21st March 2003.

Matheson, Richard. **The Shrinking Man**. “SF Masterworks, 51.” Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07463-9, 200pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1956; perhaps better known under its film title, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, this is the first new Gollancz “SF Masterwork” to be released in several months: is the series running down?) January 2003.

Meadley, Robert. **A Tea Dance at Savoy**. Introduction by Michael Moorcock. Savoy Books [446 Wilmslow Rd., Withington, Manchester M20 3BW], ISBN 0-86130-112-9, xiii+267pp, hardcover, cover by John Coulthart, £20. (Essay collection, first edition; those Savoy guys always come up with the unexpected: who would have

thought they would be issuing a collection of miscellaneous non-fiction writings by near-forgotten *New Worlds* short-story writer R. G. “Phil” Meadley?; one suspects this book began life in e-mail form, a bit like the lengthy “Fictionmags Rants” by Michael Moorcock which we published in *Interzone* ■ couple of years ago – i.e. Phil Meadley grousing to his Manchester and Leeds mates [and to old MM over there in Texas] about the issues of the day; whatever, it does make for an interesting, spiky read; the book is also heavily designed by Jon Coulthart, with “found” illustrations of various kinds – a bit like a good website, in fact; there's quite ■ lot of passing reference to the sf, fantasy and horror genres; recommended to the venturesome; for ordering information, for this and other Savoy titles, see their website: [www.savoy.abel.co.uk](http://www.savoy.abel.co.uk).) 17th February 2003.

Miéville, China. **The Tain**. Introduction by M. John Harrison. PS Publishing [Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave., Harrogate, N. Yorks. HG2 9BQ], ISBN 1-902880-63-3, 89pp, small-press trade paperback, cover by Edward Miller, £8. (Horror/fantasy novella, first edition; there is ■ simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £25 [not seen]; it's ■ signed edition, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 400 numbered hardcover copies; Harrison's three-page introduction commends this London-set story as a good example of “the New Weird.”) Dated “December 2002,” but received in January 2003.

Norman, Lisanne. **Between Darkness and Light**. DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0015-5, xi+752pp, A-format paperback, cover by Romas Kukalis, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first edition; the seventh in her lengthy “Sholan Alliance” series, all written for

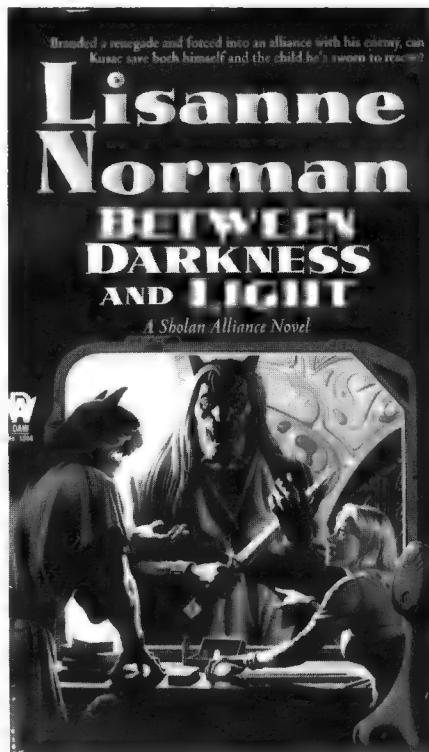
DAW Books, this is actually the first title by British writer Lisanne Norman we have ever been sent for review [see the interview with her in *Interzone* 167.] January 2003.

Oltion, Jerry. **Abandon in Place**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87316-6, 365pp, trade paperback, cover by Vincent di Fate, \$14.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; expanded from the Nebula Award-winning novella of the same title which first appeared in *F&SF*, December 1996; the author's friends from the world of hard sf are out in force to commend it – Kevin J. Anderson, Poul Anderson, Greg Bear, David Brin, etc.) 12th February 2003.

Palmer, Stephen. **Muezzinland**. Cosmos Books [PO Box 301, Holicong, PA 18928-0301, USA], ISBN 1-58715-450-1, 278pp, trade paperback, \$17.95. (Sf novel, first edition; a delayed third novel from the British author of the promising books *Memory Seed* [1996] and *Glass* [1997], it's set in a hi-tech 22nd-century Africa; to order, see the website: [www.wildsidepress.com](http://www.wildsidepress.com); Cosmos Books is an imprint of Wildside Press, a US print-on-demand publisher.) Late entry: 2002 publication, received in January 2003.

Pringle, David, ed. **Fantasy: The Definitive Illustrated Guide**. Foreword by Terry Pratchett. Carlton Books, ISBN 1-84222-747-5, 272pp, trade paperback, cover by Jan Patrik Krasny, £16.99. (Large-format copiously-illustrated guide to the fantasy genre, first published in the UK as *The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Fantasy: The Definitive Illustrated Guide*, 1998; the new, shortened title is a great improvement; this edition is also bigger [272 pages as opposed to 256], and has been updated by editorial hands other than my own [but they seem to have made quite ■ good job of it; there are errors, but not too many]; much of the new material inevitably involves Harry Potter and the recent *Lord of the Rings* films; otherwise it contains, ■ before, sections on the history and types of fantasy, extensive chapters on cinematic and television fantasy, an A-Z of authors, an alphabetical section on fictional characters and entities, plus chapters on games, fantasy worlds, and magazines, followed by ■ glossary and index; contributors of substantial text include Brian Stableford and David Langford.) 20th March 2003.

Reynolds, Alastair. **Diamond Dogs, Turquoise Days**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07526-0, 231pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf omnibus, first edition; it contains two novellas, originally published separately in limited editions: *Diamond Dogs* [PS Publishing, 2001] and *Turquoise Days* [Golden Gryphon Press, 2002]; yes, the price given above is correct – only £6.99 for ■ hardcover containing these inventive novellas which in their previous small-press trade-paperback editions were priced at £8 and \$15.95 respectively; recommended.) 13th February 2003.

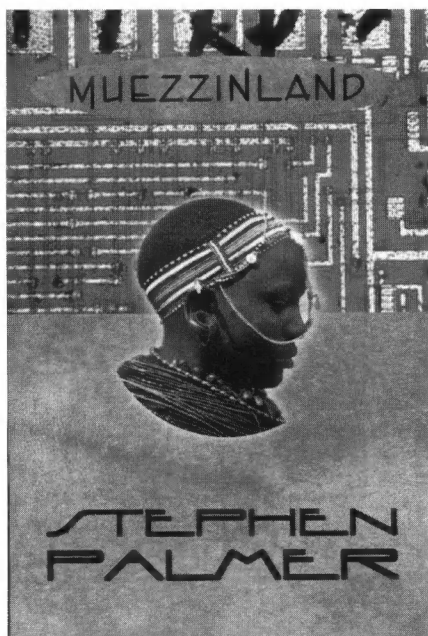


Robinson, Kim Stanley. **The Years of Rice and Salt**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-651148-1, ix+772pp, A-format paperback, £7.99. (Alternate-history sf novel, first published in the UK, 2002; set in a timeline where the Black Death of 1348-1349 succeeded in wiping out 99% of Europeans, thus removing them from history, this big book was promoted as "the most ambitious alternate history novel ever written"; certainly, it seems timely in that it depicts [in part] a Muslim-dominated world – and of course it was planned and written before the events of September 2001, which served to sharpen many people's awareness of such historical alternatives; reportedly, the author's working title was "A World Without Europe" – and maybe it would have been better if he had stuck with that.) 3rd February 2003.

Rotsler, William. **Patron of the Arts**. Foreword by Harlan Ellison. "A Robert Silverberg Selection." ibooks, ISBN 0-7434-4517-1, vi+218pp, trade paperback, cover by Joerg Maurer, £8.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1974; this is the American edition of December 2002 with a British price and publication date added; Bill Rotsler [1926-1997] was best known as a fan cartoonist, but he also wrote several sf novels, of which this is the best remembered; Ellison's three-page foreword is new, and dated September 2002; see the publishers' website, [www.ibooksinc.com](http://www.ibooksinc.com), for further details.) January 2003.

Secombe, Andy. **Limbo**. Tor (UK), ISBN 1-4050-0484-3, vii+277pp, C-format paperback, £10.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut novel by a new British writer [son of the late *Goon Show* comedian and singer, Sir Harry Secombe] which sounds as though it comes straight from Robert Rankin territory: "Mayhem is erupting on Brighton seafront... where newsagent and fantasy enthusiast Rex Boggs is about to emerge as the unlikely hero in this time of chaos. It all begins with giant garbage-eating clams – and spacewoman Serena Kowalski – plummeting to earth...") 21st March 2003.

Silver, Steven H., and Martin H. Greenberg, eds. **Wondrous Beginnings**. DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0098-8, 316pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; it contains 17 reprint stories, all of which are ostensibly their authors' first published works; contributors, arranged in chronological order of first appearance, include Murray Leinster, L. Sprague de Camp, Anne McCaffrey, Hal Clement, Arthur C. Clarke, Gene Wolfe, Barry N. Malzberg, George R. R. Martin, Howard Waldrop, Orson Scott Card, Jack McDevitt, Lois McMaster Bujold, Catherine Asaro and others; one story, Stephen Baxter's "The Xeelee Flower" [1987], is reprinted from *Interzone*; most of the stories contain newly-written introductions by the



authors, which give some added value to the book.) January 2003.

Stirling, S. M. **Conquistador**. "A novel of alternate history." Roc, ISBN 0-451-45908-3, 440pp, hardcover, cover by Jonathan Barkat, \$23.95. (Alternate-history sf novel, first edition; according to the blurb: "It's 1946. The white man is about to discover America" – which we suppose is what is known in Hollywood as "high concept.") February 2003.

Thompson, Patrick. **Execution Plan**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-710523-1, 310pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf [?] novel, first edition; a second novel by a new British writer; it involves computers and seems to be slanted towards the mainstream thriller audience; his first book, *Seeing the Wires* [2002], which we didn't receive, was commended by Michael Marshall Smith, which

commendation is quoted in the publicity sheet which accompanies this novel, as follows: "I f\*\*\*ing loved it. Great writing throughout, wonderfully structured and conceived: utterly magical and genuinely unusual. Brilliant.") 3rd February 2003.

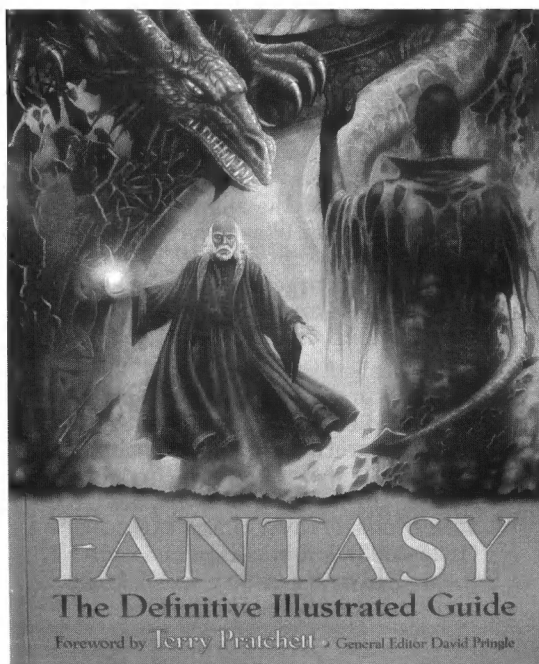
Turtledove, Harry. **American Empire: The Centre Cannot Hold**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-82012-8, 692pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £7.99. (Alternate-history sf novel, first published in the USA, 2002; second part of a follow-up series to the author's three-volume "Great War" series [not to be confused with his "Worldwar" series, or any of the several other series he has had on the go recently].) 20th January 2003.

Vance, Jack. **Lyonnesse II: The Green Pearl and Madouc**. "Fantasy Masterworks, 35." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07517-1, 776pp, B-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £8.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition in this format; the two novels it contains, *The Green Pearl* [1985] and *Madouc* [1989], were originally published in the USA as separate books; this is the second and concluding volume in Vance's "Lyonnesse" trilogy, set in a legendary drowned realm off Cornwall and Brittany.) 13th February 2003.

Westerfield, Scott. **The Risen Empire: Book One of Succession**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30555-0, 304pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; we expected this to be a debut novel by a new American writer who has published stories in the magazines – but no, apparently he has written three earlier books, paperback originals which we never saw: *Fine Prey*, *Polymorph* and *Evolution's Darling*; this new novel, the first of a diptych, is blurbbed confidently as "a sweeping epic... the first great space opera of the 21st century." March 2003.

Williams, Sean, and Shane Dix. **Remnant: Force Heretic, I**. "Star Wars: The New Jedi Order." Arrow/Lucas Books, ISBN 0-09-941036-2, xiii+413pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Foster, £5.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2003; this Australian duo of space-opera experts [see their *Orphans of Earth*, listed here last month] now lend their talents to George Lucas's *Star Wars* franchise in what looks to be the first of a trilogy.) 6th February 2003.

Wolfe, Gene. **Latro in the Mist**. Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-765-30294-2, 639pp, trade paperback, \$17.95. (Historical fantasy omnibus, first edition; proof copy received; the two novels it contains, *Soldier of the Mist* [1986] and *Soldier of Arete* [1989], tell the tale of Latro, a brain-damaged soldier in ancient Greece who holds converse with the gods; a long-awaited third novel in the sequence is said to be coming up soon.) March 2003.





I write soon after the *Columbia* shuttle disaster of 1 February. It's hard to find words, but Ken MacLeod provided this epitaph:

"Husband, McCool, Anderson, Brown, Chawla, Clark, Ramon.

"Komarov, Grissom, White, Chaffee, Dobrovolsky, Volkov, Patsayev, Resnick, Scobee, Smith, McNair, McAuliffe, Jarvis, Onizuka.

"These names will be written under other skies."

## THE MASTER PLAN

**Forrest J Ackerman**, I was fascinated to learn, once played a bit part in the film *Nudist Colony of the Dead*. As Jim Battista memorably puts it: "Of all the musicals I've seen about zombie nudists who kill only fundamentalist Christians, it was the most recent."

**Katherine MacLean** has been named as this year's SFWA Author Emeritus, to be honoured at the Nebulas over Easter. She began publishing sf in 1949 and won a 1971 Nebula for "The Missing Man."

**H.G. Wells** isn't often news these days, but various sf groups including SFWA have been offered the stupendous opportunity to buy a "historic property," the Baker Street flat where Wells lived in the early 1930s. According to owner Maggi Bonner Fox, "Although the property has been fully modernized I have endeavoured to restore and maintain many of the character features that would have been evident when Mr Wells was in residence." Young Fabian Society groupies, perhaps?

**Gary Westfahl** is to receive the SF Research Association's Pilgrim Award for lifetime critical contributions, at the SFRA event in June.

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**As Others See Us.** "Close encounters of the prolonged kind: Steven Spielberg's mini-series *Taken* will please science fiction fans but everyone else should prepare to laugh in the wrong places." (BBC website) Likewise, one Adam Smith calls *Taken* "...his smash hit ten-part series (well, sci-fi viewers loved it – there was some criticism in the wider world)..." (*Radio Times*, Jan) Was the uncritical enthusiasm of sf fans ascertained, one wonders, by actually asking any?

**Glittering Prizes.** *Arthur C. Clarke Award* shortlist: David Brin, *Kil'n People* (US *Kiln People*); M. John Harrison, *Light*; China Miéville, *The Scar*; Christopher Priest, *The Separation*; Elizabeth Moon, *Speed of Dark*; Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Years of Rice and Salt*. • *BSFA Awards* shortlist, with the usual multiple mentions of *Interzone*: NOVEL Jon Courtenay

## ANSIBLE LINK-2



DAVID LANGFORD

Grimwood, *Effendi*; M. John Harrison, *Light*; Gwyneth Jones, *Castles Made of Sand*; China Miéville, *The Scar*; Christopher Priest, *The Separation*; Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Years of Rice and Salt*. • SHORT Greg Egan "Singleton" (*IZ* 176); Neil Gaiman, *Coraline*; Sean McMullen, "Voice of Steel" (*SciFiction*); Paul Park, "If Lions Could Speak" (*IZ* 177); Charles Stross, "Router" (*Asimov's* 9/02); Michael Swanwick, "Five British Dinosaurs" (*IZ* 177). • ARTWORK Peter Gric, "Experiment 1" (*TTA* 31 cover); Dominic Harman, *IZ* 179 cover; Fraser Irving, "My Name is Death" (*2000AD Prog* 1289); Joachim Luetke, *TTA* 31; Richard Marchand, *TTA* 32 cover. • RELATED PUBLICATION Nick Gevers interviews Chris Priest (*IZ* 183); David Langford, intro to *Maps: The Uncollected John Sladek*; Oliver Morton, *Mapping Mars*; Lucius Shepard, "The Timex Machine" (electric-story.com); Fred Smith, *Once There Was a Magazine*.

**Media Watch.** A question posed in that naughty e-bulletin *Popbitch* on 15 January might make an interesting competition if I could think of a suitable prize (and, of course, if I ever dared to publish the answers): "Which *Star Trek* officer likes to pay high-class prostitutes to pleasure themselves with a large dildo while he reclines in an armchair listening to classical music?"

**R.I.P.** **Leslie Fiedler** (1917-2003), US mainstream critic who took an interest in sf, died on 29 January aged 85. His genre work included the "historical-critical" sf anthology *In Dreams Awake* (1975), and *Olaf Stapledon: A Man Divided* (1983). • **Ron Goodwin** (1925-2003), UK musician and composer, died on 8 January aged 77. His film credits include *Village of the Damned* (1960), the sequel/remake *Children of the Damned* (1964), *Day of*

*the Triffids* (1962) and *The Spaceman and King Arthur* (1979). • **Virginia Heinlein**, widow of Robert A. Heinlein and editor of his selected letters (*Grumbles from the Grave*, 1989), died on 18 January; she was 86. Joel Rosenberg wrote: "It was a peaceful passing; she's been talking for some time about how it was getting to be time to go." • **Virginia Kidd** (1921-2003), US literary agent and sf anthologist (twice in collaboration with Ursula Le Guin), died on 12 January after prolonged illness. Best known as an sf agent, she wrote some fiction – her first solo story was "Kangaroo Court" in Damon Knight's *Orbit 1* (1966) – was married to James Blish 1947-1963, and brought a strong feminist viewpoint to the genre. • **John Mantley** (1920-2003), TV writer and producer whose sf novel was *The 27th Day* (1956; film with JM's script 1957), died on 14 January; he was 82. • **Daphne Oram**, pioneer of electronic music who in 1957 persuaded the BBC to launch its Radiophonic Workshop (famed in sf for the 1963 *Dr Who* theme music), died on 5 January aged 77. • **Peter Tinniswood** (1936-2003), UK author and scriptwriter most popular for radio and TV work, died on 9 January after long treatment for oral cancer. He was 66. His idiosyncratic humour tended to the surreal and fantastic; the outrageous cricket stories are set in what's virtually an alternate world, while *The Stirk of Stirk* (1974) is a comic-heroic fantasy that didn't make it into the *Encyclopedia*.

**Thog's Masterclass.** *True Romance Dept* (or, *The Fingers Have It*). "Discreetly glancing around, my fingers gingerly wriggled into the embroidered hole of her panties..." (Joseph Covino Jr, *Prince of the Perverse*, 2002) • *Dept of Dimensional Analysis*. "If you could enlarge the human body, blow it up to a vast size, you would see that it was literally nothing but a swirling mass of cells and atoms, clustered together into smaller swirls of cells and atoms." (Michael Crichton, *Prey*, 2002) • *Dept of One-Off Use*. "Passing over the roadie's ceramic teeth was a tongue that would help the man form a single word." (P. P. Hartnett, *Rock'n'Roll Suicide*, 2002) • *Dept of Arresting Simile*. "When he was yet a million miles away the bright ring of fire that marked its portal filled the sky in front of him, flexing and twisting like the devil's anus in spasms of immortal agony." (Alan Glasser, *The Demon Cosmos*, 1978) • *Relativity Dept*. "I once read somewhere," said Peter, "that a minute on Mars is equal to a year on our Earth, so that would be the reason why everything is terrifically speeded up." (Prof A. M. Low, *Adrift in the Stratosphere*, 1937)

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**DAVID (ALEA\*~) LAMBERT**, writer-teacher and RPG-devotee, invites *Interzone* readers to peruse his new website archive: <http://web.onetel.net.uk/~dalambert>

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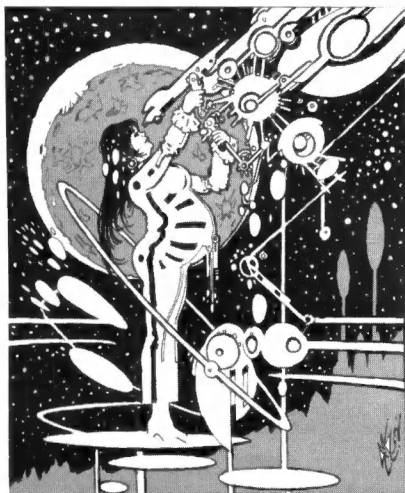
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